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Dionysian Dominatrices:

The Nineteenth-Century Decadents/ce of Alcott, Egerton, D'Arcy and Rachilde

by

Sarah Elizabeth Maier B.A., M.A.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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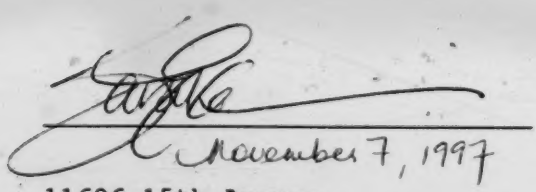

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11686 15th Avenue
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T6J 7E1

University of Alberta

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Dionysian Dominatrices: The Nineteenth-Century Decadents/ce of Alcott, Egerton, D'Arcy and Rachilde" submitted by Sarah Elizabeth Maier in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Milan V. Dimić (Supervisor)
Comparative Literature

Margaret M. Van de Pitte
Philosophy

Edward Mozejko
Comparative Literature

Bruce Stovel
English

Earle H. Waugh
Comparative Studies

Chris Shodgrass (External Examiner)
English at The University of Florida

To love a woman, is, for an artist, to change one's religion. She is the rival of the idea, and she never forgives....

Arthur Symons, "Christian Trevalga"

Her life blossomed in excess through what has been called by the philosphers *decadence*, the end of everything.

Rachilde, *La Marquise de Sade*

Abstract

The idea of decadence at the *fin-de-siècle* of the nineteenth century has been nearly impossible to define, and is equally problematic to theorize according to any consistent criteria or cluster of ideas. Recent criticism has viewed decadence as the product of the misogyny, homophobia, and racism of the male imagination which seeks revenge on women who merely become both the iconic content of male-authored decadent texts and its necessary support, without consideration of the possibility of female decadents/ce.

In this thesis, I confirm the gynophobia of the male-authored decadent text, and move beyond its restrictions to a consideration of the tales "A Marble Woman; or, The Mysterious Model" (1865), "Behind a Mask; or, a Woman's Power" (1866) and *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877) by "A. M. Barnard"/Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888), the short story collections *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894) by "George Egerton," the short story collections *Monochromes* (1895) and *Modern Instances* (1898) by Ella D'Arcy, and the novels *Monsieur Venus* (1884) and *La Jongleuse* (1900) by "Rachilde." The texts of these women authors share many of the stylistic traits and thematic

concerns of male-authored decadent texts such as the love of the artificial and the ornamental, shocking statements and images of literary cross-dressing, sexual excess, perversion and *ennui* without being merely a replication of those male texts. These female authors, and their decadent female characters, refuse the role of passive 'Other' imposed by the rigid binaries which previous theories/theorists have posited as constitutive of decadence, causing those binaries to deconstruct. These female decadents manipulate a mask of womanhood and the masquerade of the proper, idealized woman in order to annihilate her image and regenerate a decadent female who is driven by desire and sexuality, necessarily located by tradition as perverse because of its deviation from social conventions. It is by virtue of the woman's usurpation or appropriation of the position as artist that she can be considered a decadent within this historical framework. These women authors become creators of worlds whose laws are self-contained, and who are thus engaged in transgression; freeing subject(ed) female sexuality through the dispersal of the inherited stultifying rules, these women revision the world and impose a counter-discourse to nineteenth-century society and male-authored decadents/ce.

This reading of female decadence is from a feminist perspective and incorporates, for purposes of elucidation, appropriate theoretical concepts from various texts such as Diana Fuss's concept of strategic essentialism, Eve Sedgewick's consideration of woman's place in the homosocial continuum, and Judith Butler's questions regarding the performativity of gender. All of the texts are read with a Foucauldian eye to relations of power both within the texts and in the decadent context, as well as a strong exploration of the Nietzschean conceptualization of Dionysian decadence.

Acknowledgements

If it is possible to say, in the steps of Oscar Wilde, that what follows in these pages is "chaos, illuminated by flashes of lightning," it is in the hope that I have captured the brilliance of those people who gave me strength with their unwavering support.

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challenging criticism and his energizing enthusiasm which will immeasurably advance this project in the months ahead.

My dalliance into Decadence crystallized into the ideas contained in this dissertation at the School of Criticism and Theory at Dartmouth College. The scholarships I received from both the School and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research at the University of Alberta made it possible to immerse myself in an incredible atmosphere which I could only hope to repeat in the future. Professors Elaine Showalter and Naomi Schor's enthusiasm for and rigorous challenges to the naïve thoughts of a young scholar during my intense introduction to "theoretical" society has made immeasurable differences in both my life and work.

The many documents and texts that I required were retrieved for me with a smile from dusty library shelves, both near and far, by the efficient Interlibrary Loan staff at the University of Alberta and by the ever helpful staff at Dartmouth College Library. I would like to express my special appreciation to Elizabeth Kuiken; my even more unusual inquiries always benefit from her guidance as the irreplaceable clairvoyant of the Salter Reading Room where I took refuge at many times during the

storm of graduate school.

My family and friends know that I am oft struck dumb in moments when I wish to express my deepest indebtedness. Of these important people, none have had a greater influence on the path which I have chosen than Mr. Donald MacPherson; this man, whose rendition of Chaucer's "Prologue" showed me that great literature enriches life with the memories it creates for both the teacher and the student, will always have my greatest admiration. I only hope that I may capture the essence of his passion for literature in my own, and instill the desire for knowledge in students of my own.

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For my parents--

without whom none of this would matter.

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Introduction

The very idea of decadence, or what it means to be famously, or infamously, decadent, is nearly impossible to define, and is equally problematic to theorize according to any consistent criteria or cluster of ideas; it is difficult to say where aestheticism stops and decadence begins, or if there is a definitive difference between them. If one is to try to define and to theorize the existence of female decadence, it is more important to consider whether these are gendered terms, and whether the definition/theory excludes women from consideration as worthy decadents.

Originally used positively, or at least neutrally, to denote decay or decline, the term "decadence" was heavily influenced in the latter half of the century by the writings of Bourget, Nordau, and Nietzsche. With the writings of these three writers in particular, the concept of decadence, as it applies to literature, art, and culture of the nineteenth century, became burdened by associations with the Latin *decadere*, a falling away or sinking; with the French *decadence* which suggests waning and downfall, and with the German *sittlicher Wahnsinn*, the moral lunacy, madness, and degeneration that Max Nordau vehemently opposed in his 1895 condemnation of decadence, *Degeneration*. The decadent literature of the nineteenth century is exemplified by

authors such as Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Georges du Maurier, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Oscar Wilde and others whose texts demonstrate a love of artificial effects, a preference of art to nature and city to country, as well as a plethora of shocking statements and images of sexual peccadillos, sexual excess and mental *ennui*, especially a boredom with anything traditional or natural, a style which "balances the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses with the Apollonian triumphing at great cost for its effort" (Reed 60).

The term "decadence" is used in two ways; first, as a social phenomenon, and second, as an aesthetic definition of a particular period of decline in art, literature,etc.. According to the Oxford English Dictionary and Le Grand Robert, the French equivalent, "*décadence*," was originally used in 1413. It was derived from the latin "*decadentia*" and "*de-*" down and "*cadĕre*" to fall. The prevalent accentuation was formerly de'cadence (after decay) but the pronounciation 'decadence became "more scholarly" c. 1895. The term was first used to describe "a declyning, a decaying" Hellenistic society by Vico, Montesquieu (*Considération sur les Causes De la Grandeur Des Romans et de Leurs Décadence*, 1734) and Rousseau. Used to mark the following periods of literature: late Greek/Hellenistic literature, Roman literature after

the death of Augustus, and English drama after Shakespeare, it later became a descriptor for a particular school of art and literature, the French "*décadent*" is thought to be used in this new sense after a public reading by Paul Verlaine in 1880 of his sonnet which describes a degenerate state of the spirit that was to pervade French literature and characterization in the years approaching the *fin-de-siècle*, a characterization later developed by Théopohile Gautier in his *Notice* to an edition of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1872) and again by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Der Fall Wagner* (1888). Further evidence of the acceptance of this term to define a specific literary movement in both England and France occurs with Max Beerbohm's spurious 1894 comment in *The Yellow Book* that "finally, English literature... must fall at length into the hands of the decadents" (OED).

Critical understanding of the term decadence is varied which makes any comprehensive reference to its time, context, style, themes, motifs, politics or purposes extremely complex. Decadence has been described by such critics as Paul Bourget, A. E. Carter, Sander Gilman, and John Reed as the disruptive act of annihilation and recreation in a work of art or as the place where the unity of a book decomposes to give way to the independence of the

page. The various depictions of a decadent aesthetic seem to unify around the principle of an assertion of the will which is self-supporting and allows for self-creation out of the chaos of modern existence in an artwork which is "elevated with Nietzschean slyness and intensity" (Reed 12). These definitions have been conjoined with symptoms of cultural decay including sexual dysfunction or perversion, nihilism, and degeneracy as well as with certain character/human types including effete men, destructive women and decaying aristocratic families. There is also general agreement that

> the decadent is a man caught between two opposite and apparently incompatible pulls: on the one hand, he is drawn by the world, its necessities, and the attractive impressions he derives from it, while on the other hand, he yearns toward the eternal, the ideal and the unworldly. (Thornton 26)

In addition to the uncontested assumption that a decadent is necessarily, and by definition, male, several critics including Karl Beckson, Charles Bernheimer, Elizabeth Constable, Richard Dellamora, Kathy Psomiades, John Reed, Elaine Showalter, Chris Snodgrass et al. have pointed out that these decadent authors and/or artists delight in stylized descriptions of artifice, physical sensations, perversity, rare jewellery, orientalism, exoticism and all

things strange and wonderful in order to create sensuous art which allows them, according to Walter Pater, "to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, [for] to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life" (12).

These same critics differ as to whether or not the decadents wrote by formulas, had a universal or unified point of view, or were moral, immoral, or amoral. To some readers, decadence was merely a current of taste and ideas, and was more of a tendency than a bona fide movement, evidenced by the inexactitude of its contextual time frame.

These multiple, yet limiting, critical uses of the term decadence are problematic; its use refers to a style, but more often than not it may describe behaviour considered to be unnatural. Perversity of form, perversity of matter or perversity of life are privileged in various books and articles on the subject;[1] however, something that is vaguely called decadence continues to describe qualities of what has been called the *fin-de-siècle*. Aesthetic preferences prevail over moral inclination, ennui is an affectation over the dullness of modernity, and new sensations are sensually courted in desperation by both artists and their characters in their exploration of the tension between the ideal and

[1]I include, at the end of this dissertation, an extensive bibliography of various subjects and investigations pertinent to the study of decadence.

the real. Decadence is self-conscious and is perhaps self-destroying; several critics believe that the nineteenth-century decadent impulse ended with the century.

Recent criticism has viewed Victorian aestheticism and decadence as the revenge of a male imagination on women. Bram Dijkstra has shown how decadent aestheticism created monstrous women as objects of desire, while Elaine Showalter has pointed to the widespread "misogyny, homophobia, and racism" (1990: 11) of many *fin-de-siècle* texts. According to Rita Felski, the whole tradition "has sought transcendence through a denial and repression of the (female) body" (1991: 1104), and Kathy Alexis Psomiades contends that women as "icons...are both the content of the Aestheticist art and its necessary support" (33). Predicated on what is assumed to be the unregenerate physicality of woman, decadence is viewed as essentially a male idealism which Camille Paglia, in *Sexual Personae*, equates with association of Western art with sexual voyeurism, or Apollonian objectification (35). I agree with these critics and with Martha Vicinus, who declares decadence exhibits "gynophobia" (91); however, I hope to go forward from these assertions to consider the possibility of a woman decadent or a female decadence.

The female authors I have chosen to examine here are Louisa May Alcott (United States of America), "George Egerton" (Australia) and Ella D'Arcy (Ireland), and "Rachilde" (France)[2] as well as their complex heroines, who represent a poisonous threat to the male decadent worldview. While previous critics acknowledge that many nineteenth-century women writers challenge conventional ideas of woman, I hope to demonstrate how these four women writers' discursive position is different from other female-authored texts of the nineteenth century. Precisely, I wish to raise the possibility of female-authored decadents/ce and how it differs in content and intention from male-authored decadent texts. According to my sources, not a single critic has previously explored the possibility of decadence or the revisionary implications of Louisa May Alcott's adult fictions, "A Marble Woman; or, The Mysterious Model" (1865), "Behind a Mask; or, a Woman's Power" (1866) and *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877), Egerton's *Keynotes* (1893) and

[2]Other authors which may be considered in the future of this project are "Vernon Lee" (Violet Piaget 1856-1935), "Michael Field" (Katharine Harris Bradley 1864-1914 and Edith Emma Cooper 1862-1913) and "Renée Vivien" (Pauline Tarn 1877-1909).

Discords (1894), D'Arcy's *Monochromes* (1895) and *Modern Instances* (1898), for the decadent movement. Unfortunately, the only female author who has garnered the attention of scholars of the decadent movement is Rachilde; these same critics seem only to seek in her works, *Monsieur Venus* (1884) and *La Jongleuse* (1900), an example of a female and/or female decadence that reflects back *male* decadence.

There is general agreement amongst critics such as Madeleine Stern and Elaine Showalter that Louisa May Alcott wrote two kinds of fiction--sensational thrillers and moral tales--and that these two types reflect the author's subversive and conformist selves. The discrepancy between the beloved children's friend and the masked Louisa May Alcott whose fiction abounds in madhouse scenes, mistaken identities, illicit passions and ruthless heroines argues for an author who is not simply versatile, but complex. Born on November 29, 1832 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, she was one of the daughters of the Transcendentalist educator, Amos Bronson Alcott, and was raised in the traditions of family friends Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Since her father's idealism and impracticality made him incapable

of earning a living, it fell to Alcott to be the family provider; she worked at a variety of jobs, including teacher, seamstress, governess, and companion, until she began to publish. In addition to writing in a variety of genres for periodicals--poetry, fairy tales, sketches--Alcott published the blood-and-thunder tales that are the focus of this investigation. The women in Alcott's fiction may be perceived as a radical, visionary or at least re-visionary impulse within the decadent context and the problems encountered by the woman artist in nineteenth-century society.

"George Egerton," born Mary Chavelita Dunne, was the daughter of an Australian sea captain and was born in Melbourne, Australia in December of 1859. Privately educated, Egerton was an associate of the Scandinavian writers including Ola Hansson and Knut Hamsun and was an avid reader of the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Married several times with disastrous results, she moved to London in 1890, and to Ireland later in life. John Lane of the Bodley Head was planning a series of short works by new writers, and her first collection of stories, *Keynotes* (1893), was published at an opportune moment. Like many of the New Woman authors,

Egerton reacted strongly against the social conditioning that left women constrained by an artificial morality, believing instead that there was strength in woman's chaotic nature. All of Egerton's work drew extensively upon her own relationships; as a consequence, they created a sensation in the late-Victorian literary world in Britain for the frank exploration of female sexuality and psychology which will be examined here, and will argue for their implications for a female decadent subject.

Ella D'Arcy was both a figure of mystery and an object of desire for literary men and women of the 1890s in England. Born in either 1856 or 1857, D'Arcy was educated in France and Germany, with her education culminating in her stay at the Slade School for Art in London. Unfortunately for the visual medium, D'Arcy's eyesight began to fail, so she turned to writing in the same precise and detailed manner that she had painted. Her first literary success came with the publication of "Irremediable," a scathing treatment of marriage, in the *Yellow Book* in 1894. Biographical information is elusive, but other sources have suggested that D'Arcy never reached her potential because she was incurably

idle. Never married, D'Arcy spent her final years in Paris after many relationships, and her fiction reflects these facts of exile and alienation. D'Arcy highlights the frailties of love relationships and the intensities of sexuality; further, her training as a painter allows her to create fictional character portraits with the opulent exactitude of a Pre-Raphaelite or decadent artist in order to create a synaesthetic experience for the reader. As she is one of the most challenging and disillusioned writers of the late-nineteenth century, the exploration of her fiction here will lead also to the analysis of the implications of male decadent authors for a woman with decadent tendencies of her own.

The connection of "Rachilde" to decadence is a strong one; born Marguerite Emery on February 11, 1860 in Périgeux, France, she is the most colourful personality of the women represented here. To become a woman writer at the turn of the century, according to Rachilde, was to assume an unenviable personality. Rachilde began her literary career anonymously; encouraged by a letter sent to her by Victor Hugo, Rachilde went on to write with obsessive regularity to produce over sixty works. Attacked by journalists and critics for her masculine

garb, her initial single lifestyle and her lack of feminine decorum, she believed she was either not enough, or too much, of a woman to abide by conventional notions of gender, becoming instead an androgyne of letters. A prolific writer and literary critic, Rachilde was later married to Alfred Vallette, with whom she published the famous *Le Mercure de France*. Rachilde's fiction, full of evocative images of libertine sexuality, synaesthetic experience, and gender inversion, is the ultimate expression of woman's usurpation and redefinition of the role of a decadent who is both a woman and an artist.

All four women authors share many of the stylistic traits and thematic concerns of male-authored decadent texts, such as the love of the artificial and the ornamental in both language and theme, shocking statements and images of literary cross-dressing, sexual excess, and ennui. However, I consider that the importance of this project will be to understand how these traits, concerns and differences reveal a decadent woman, and how the theorization of such a female decadent may revision and radicalize our understanding of decadent literature. I believe that it is crucial for feminist re-considerations of nineteenth-century women writers to

attempt to define what it is to be a female decadent or whether such a position is, in fact, possible for a woman in light of traditional definitions of aestheticism and decadence. If a female author such as Alcott, Egerton, D'Arcy, or Rachilde refuses the role of passive other that is imposed upon her, then the rigid binaries which previous theories/theorists have posited as constitutive of decadence must necessarily deconstruct. The male-decadent construction of gender merely reinscribes the dialectics of power that the texts ostensibly call into question, which reveals patriarchal anxieties about gender and sexuality; I believe that a consideration of the power of the unconventional sexuality of a decadent woman may call into question the facile nature of previous constructions of decadent themes and subjects.

My reading of decadence is from a broadly feminist perspective and will incorporate, for purposes of elucidation, appropriate theoretical concepts from various texts such as Diana Fuss's concept of strategic essentialism, Eve Sedgwick's consideration of woman's place in the homosocial continuum, and Judith Butler's questions regarding the performativity of gender. I read Alcott, Egerton, D'Arcy, and Rachilde's works with a

Foucauldian eye to relations of power both within the texts, and in the decadent contextual framework to see where

> the nature of these rules [relations of gender and power] allows violence to be inflicted on violence and the resurgence of new forces that are sufficiently strong to dominate those in power. Rules are empty in themselves, violent and unfinalized; they are impersonal and can be bent to any purpose. The successes of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them; controlling this complex mechanism, they will make it function so as to overcome the rulers through their own rules. (Foucault 1984: 85-86)

This understanding of the ways in which power dialectics can be appropriated by the previously enslaved subject will be invaluable to a discernment of the relations of sex, gender and power within the development of female decadents/ce.

For these reasons, I begin my task with a discussion of the roles allocated to women by the American/British/French conventions of the nineteenth-century in an attempt to contextualize the radical vision of a potential decadent woman as either artist or character before addressing exactly what constitutes the male-authored decadent texts which restrictively idealize woman as muse at the expense of her individuality, her sexuality, and sometimes, her life. These considerations lead me to believe that Alcott, Egerton, D'Arcy, and Rachilde's female characters represent escalating degrees of decadent, discontented women who wilfully resist the role designated to them by both male-authored decadent fiction and society.

These female decadents manipulate a mask of womanhood and the masquerade of the proper, idealized woman in order to annihilate her image and regenerate a decadent female who is driven by desire and sexuality. It is by virtue of the woman's usurpation or appropriation of the position of the artist that she can be considered a decadent. These women become creators of worlds whose laws are self-contained and who are thus necessarily engaged in transgression; freeing subject(ed) female

sexuality through the dispersal of the inherited, stultifying rules, these women revision the world and impose a counter-discourse to male-authored decadents/ce. For Alcott, Egerton, D'Arcy, and Rachilde, the

> repressed content, I think, [is], not [only] erotic impulses, but an impulse to power: a fantasy of power that would revise the social grammar in which women are never defined as subjects; a fantasy of power that disdains a sexual exchange in which women can participate only as objects of circulation. (Miller 41)

Finally, my consideration of female decadents/ce will point out how the female players, both author and heroine, question the "system of rules" that is played by all decadent players which "in itself has no essential meaning, [so] in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, [one must] force its participation in a different game" (Foucault 1984: 86) and to subject decadence to the rules which they recreate.

Note on the Text

For the purposes of ease of reading and stylistic integration into the main body of the text, I have chosen to use English translations of all French texts without intending to diminish the importance of the content. Quotations taken from fictional texts may be found in the original French at the bottom of the relevant page, while all critical and theoretical texts are quoted solely in English.

Chapter One

American/British/French Woman in the Nineteenth Century

> Women...are double. They are allied with what is regular, according to the rules, since they are wives and mothers, and allied as well with those natural disturbances...which are the epitome of paradox, order and disorder.
>
> --Cixous and Clement, *Newly Born Woman* 8

Woman is the paradox or essential and eternal mystery which has fuelled centuries of conflicting and changing definitions of her doubleness and vigorous polemical debate about woman's nature and woman's role. These debates concern women's legal status and rights, particularly within marriage; women's role within the family; and their wider social role--their participation in the world of work and public affairs. Within the literary and cultural space I am particularly concerned with, the nineteenth-century debates on the Woman Question (or the Woman Problem) were instigated and orchestrated by the demands made by, or on behalf of, women for the widening of their sphere, and by resistance

to those demands. All shades of opinion supported their case by appeals to a particular definition of "woman" or "womanliness."[1]

Broadly speaking, the contest was waged on the site of the dominant definition of the proper feminine, an ideal of the domestic ideology according to which woman was defined primarily in terms of her reproductive and domestic functions within the developing bourgeois family. The feminine norm was that of a relative creature of a middle-class wife and mother. In her limited capacity, woman was charged with the responsibility of acting as the keeper of the conscience and as the guardian of the spiritual and moral purity of society. The passionless domestic ideal, the Angel in the House, was expected to be the creator and guardian of the newly moralised and privatised domestic haven, the middle-class home. This image of the domestic angel is of the utmost importance to any discussion of the

[1]There are several studies which are valuable to any understanding of the dichotomization of American/British and French/Western European literary women; in particular, Nina Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon,* Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity,* Christina Crosby's *The Ends of History,* Helsinger et al.'s *The Woman Question* and Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* and *No Man's Land (I-III).*

idealized construction of woman as closer to nature than her male counterpart. I wish to stipulate this ideal of womanhood as the "norm" in order to advance my discussion to the problematics of woman's attempts to deviate from this image. Exemplary images of the angelic woman could include such characters as Elizabeth Bennett (*Pride and Prejudice*), Dorothea Brooke (*Middlemarch*), and Jane Eyre (*Jane Eyre*). In order to define what it is for a woman to be considered decadent, it is essential to have a strong understanding of the previous constructions of woman.

This ideology of the separate spheres enshrined a doctrine of sexual difference based on the complementariness of, rather than competitiveness between, man and woman. Woman was able to wield her influence in the domestic sphere, while man exercised his power in the hazardous, hostile public domain; however, since the chief duty of woman was to sacrifice herself to the physical and emotional needs of others, and, above all, to submit to her husband, woman's power was problematic, if not entirely illusory. Various discourses were deployed in patriarchal cultures in order to reinforce the dominant definition of domesticated

woman, to delimit the domestic sphere, and to inculcate the belief that "the man *naturally* governs: the woman *as naturally* obeys" (Pykett 13).[2] This "natural" state of woman in nineteenth-century affairs was continually in the process of construction and reproduction in legal, medical and scientific discourses, as well as in the social sciences. Each of these areas developed definitions of woman which arose from, and authorised the claims to power of, the bourgeois male.

The rapid development of nineteenth-century science constructed theories of sexual difference which justified and perpetuated existing sexual and social relations and their inequalities. In particular, medical science, as Foucault has argued in *The History of Sexuality,* was one of the chief instruments for the definition, regulation and "hysterization" (146) of women and female sexuality in the nineteenth century which constructed woman as a creature totally in thrall to biology and to her body. The perception of woman's kinship with nature gave rise to a social role which was seen as the inevitable

[2]Lyn Pykett cites this cultural dichotomization from the original document, *Woman Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce* (1840) by A. Walker.

consequence of her reproductive function; the womb and the ovaries controlled the delicate organism that was woman. This theory of sexual difference was used as an argument to deny girls and young women the same education, opportunities, and responsibilities as their brothers because the rigour of such an education was deemed to be incompatible with the strain of the menstrual cycle; it was believed that any intellectual development in young women would use up the energy which they should conserve for future reproduction. The issues surrounding the Woman Question were seen not merely as a form of social rebellion, but rather as a revolt against nature, because "[Biological] Sex," it was argued, "is fundamental, lies deeper than culture, [and] cannot be ignored or defied with impunity" (Maudsley 467).

For feminist readers of nineteenth-century texts, this determinate relegation of women to the role of man's natural and innocent "other" is highly problematic. Man's historical consciousness is a mode of self-consciousness, an awareness of the self by means of the other; because self-consciousness is not an innocent achievement, then otherness becomes conceivable as only the means to an end. Women become excluded from the

world-historical realm and are imagined only as part of the natural realm as the inferior members of society.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf locates one crucial aspect of woman's subjection to man in that "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (35). In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir further discusses how this dialectic articulates the relative roles of the sexes:

> The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symmetrically only as a matter of form... . In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral...whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (xxi)

She continues:

> Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being....She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with

> reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute--she is the Other. (xxii)

Confined by the masterful male subject to passivity and repetition, woman in patriarchy is a prisoner of immanence. This Hegelian dialectic of the empowerment of the male as the master who defines culture and the disempowerment of the woman as the slave who is stuck in immanence due to her biology caused many nineteenth-century commentators to believe that any attempt to ignore the truth of woman's indissoluble link with nature would result in "a monstrosity--something which having ceased to be woman is not yet man" (Maudsley 477). A woman who attempted to challenge the master's discourse and resist the dominant definitions was held to be unwomanly, ill, or increasingly as the century wore on, unsexed--a member of an intermediate sex or an androgyne without place or space in nineteenth-century culture. The image of the hermaphrodite in texts such as *Mademoiselle de Maupin* by Theophile Gautier and *Under the Hill* by Aubrey Beardsley became an alternative image that was an equally threatening means of displacing the binary

oppositions upon which society rested its idealized sexual and gender constructions. Such politicized challenges to conventional sex roles caused a great deal of anxiety, an anxiety which is clearly an important component of the representations of woman and women in mid to late-nineteenth century fiction as well as the critical response to those representations.

If the images of women in the nineteenth century were controlled by the same dialectic and binary oppositions that control both cultural and social conditions, then it is important to understand that binaries encode certain assumptions. To begin with, just as culture is presumed to dominate nature, the construction of binary oppositions as the relation between a superior term and an inferior one legitimates a structure of domination (Butler 37); thus, binarism implicitly asserts the inevitability of power and subjugation. To understand nineteenth-century society, one must realize that socio-political conventions were based on the assumption of a dialectic of power between men and women which draws its basis from such binary oppositions. Any relinquishing of power by men to women would represent various changes in society which men

fear; however, there is a constant desire and battle of wills by both sexes for power: women wish to claim power for themselves and men wish to maintain the larger share of power by controlling women. Consequently, the patriarchal obsessive need to control through categorization became the ideology of the cultural imagination in which men are understood as active, sexual and strong-willed, and women are further divided into distinctions as passive, passionless, weak, pure or impure, ideal or real, all of which culminate ultimately to define woman as either an angel in the house or a whore. This divided thinking characterizes both nineteenth-century fiction and social discourses about women, as well as women's sexuality. In scientific and medical discourses, woman was represented by means of the familiar mind-body dichotomy of western thought: woman's mind could only be determined by the biological and/or maternal functions of her body. The nineteenth-century theorists's insistence on the primacy of maternity constructed woman as a body stuck in immanence and defined her only in terms of her sexual function. Paradoxically, at the same time woman was persistently represented in popular culture and literature as non-

sexual or asexual--disembodied--a contradiction fully explored by women writers of the mid to late-nineteenth century such as those found in this study, Louisa May Alcott, "George Egerton," Ella D'Arcy and "Rachilde."

Proper or normal femininity was represented as passionless and passive, while active and autonomous sexual feeling denoted masculinity, or a deviant, improper femininity (Pykett 12). Women are either non-sexual or they are omni-sexual nymphomaniacs, criminals, hysterics or prostitutes. The role of woman becomes a contradictory discourse organised around a convention of the respectable feminine. The proper feminine is a system of difference which designates woman as *essentially* different from man based on a series of excluded terms. Those devalued terms constitute the proper feminine's own suppressed Other: the improper feminine. The system of the proper feminine is exemplified by the domestic ideal or angel who is the keeper of the domestic temple with her asexuality, passionlessness, innocence, self-abnegation, commitment to duty, and self-sacrifice. Her lack of an independent or legal identity creates her dependence as both slave and victim to patriarchy. In opposition, the improper feminine is represented as a

demonic whore who is a subversive risk to the family because she is threateningly sexualized, self-assertive, desiring and actively pleasure-seeking in her pursuit of self-fulfilment and self-identity. A woman's independence creates her as her own master who men fear may turn on them as victimiser or predator.

In *Idols of Perversity,* Bram Dijkstra discusses how such dichotomies of woman demonstrate that the Victorian temper is unyieldingly dualistic (145); specifically, it is only capable of understanding sexuality in terms of polarities. The Victorian woman is either the sexually passive and angelic wife or the sexually charged and demonic mad woman in the attic. In a society where sexuality is not merely a socially marginalized discourse, but becomes literally unspeakable in fiction,[3] unself-conscious writing on the subject would be impossible. Perceived as chaotic, sex and sexuality in general, but particularly a woman's sexual appetites and desires, are seen as a threat to Victorian ideology and to the conceptual structures upon which such beliefs, and

[3]I refer here to scenes of elision when dealing with female sexuality such as the seduction and/or rape of Tess Durbeyfield in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles.*

indeed Victorian society itself, are predicated. For example, the debates concerning the "Girl of the Period" and the rise of the "Wild Woman"[4] call for a woman's voluntary subjection of herself and her sexuality to a standard of womanliness that, while personally restrictive and unjust, may constitute her only means of survival in society unless she is to become a social outcast.

With the dawning ache of modernism came the need to escape from such oversimplified images of women that had previously dominated the roles of women in fiction, to escape the stereotype of the "female malady [which was] associated with the sexuality and essential nature of women" (Showalter 1985: 7). A new image of woman would necessarily introduce her inner feelings, even sexual feelings. Authors such as Grant Allen, Thomas Hardy, and Henrik Ibsen were sympathetic to the demands placed upon women by society and were committed to use their fiction to redefine existing social and sexual realities. Through their progressive portraits of women, these authors begin to explore how real women have flaws,

[4]I refer here mostly to the debates and commentaries of Eliza Lynn Linton.

needs, and desires which are not acknowledged in the scope of male fantasies or idealized images. Unfortunately, women are constantly judged according to their ability to live up to or to project the ideal image which men desire, an image that necessarily restricts women's actions and choices by making the women themselves subordinate to an imposed ideal of social perfection and sexual purity.

For example, Hardy challenges the established boundaries of the ideal woman with his pure but problematic woman, Tess, in an attempt to demythologize the imposition of the ideal on women; further, he recognizes the problems those women face in society as men reject the real woman for the idealized image and questions the role of men as the creators of the ideal which controls women. It is a myth which is authorized by men in an attempt to create woman in the ideal mould which he invents and that is upheld by convention. As a result, the real woman is obliterated in the search for the ideal woman. When the woman does not measure up, she is judged negatively by both men and women in society. Once the woman is rejected for these reasons, she is cast off to the opposite end of the social spectrum from the

angelic ideal: she is labelled as a fallen woman or a whore. The image of the fallen woman in nineteenth-century literature identifies a wide range of feminine identities that exhibit a variety of taboo behaviours; however, it takes a standard form where a sexually compromised woman is seen as lacking the autonomy of action and coherence of thought possessed without question by a male subject. We must remember that nineteenth-century society based its judgments of sexuality and women on a strict essentialism where purity is definitive of female sexuality, but not of male; the sexual urges of men were thought of as regrettable, but natural, while a woman who admitted to similar desires was thought to be unnatural. The resultant nineteenth-century literature[5] sees the sexually active or fallen woman portrayed as either the passive object of male

[5]Although this project does not hearken back to the Romantic movement, there are two comments on women that are relevant here. First, Keats's images of the mythical Lilith or faye *femme fatale* is one of the earliest manifestations of the dichotomy of woman which will be considered throughout this text. Second, some Romantic writers and philosophers offered a more positive assessment of woman's closeness to nature that included a wider range of emotional capacity for the human and natural environment. As a consequence, the image of woman was not as derogatorily essentialized as it became in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

desire or as a mythical Keatsian *belle dame sans merci* and/or as a seductively Wildean *femme fatale*.

Such women, either authors or characters, who desired the emancipation of woman's body and intellect from the strictures of society, provoked the rage of both critics and authors. August Strindberg wrote the Naturalist play, *Miss Julie,* in 1888, to confirm that only tragedy could await a woman who did not abide social convention and attempted to escape her passionless nature. In the revealing preface that relegates all progressive social changes for women to degeneracy, Strindberg denies that his subject, an aristocratic heroine's fall and suicide which occur as a result of her brief affair with her father's valet, has anything to do with "the controversial issues of today, since questions of social climbing or falling, of higher or lower, better or worse, of man and woman, are, have been, and will be of lasting interest" (Strindberg 75); however, Strindberg's list of Julie's circumstances overwhelmingly insists on the controversy of the Woman Question as its very *raison d'etre*. Strindberg focusses on Julie's mother as a feminist and a man-hater who passed on nefarious principles to her daughter, on Julie's

upbringing that allowed her to be equal to a boy-child, and on Julie's own nature. Strindberg sees Julie's fall as the result of a degenerate female lineage that she has inherited from her mother's "defective constitution" (Strindberg 79). Julie is doomed to misery or suicide because she tries to be a New Woman, whom Strindberg renames in his preface as "the half-woman, the man-hater," who, "now that she has been discovered...has stepped to the front and begun to make a noise" (Strindberg 78). Although he claims that his play is not a "moral sermon" (Strindberg 77), it can be read as a lament for the loss of natural woman and as a moralistic tirade against the New Woman, whose type Strindberg claims "implies degeneration; it is not a good type [of woman] and it does not endure; but it can unfortunately transmit its misery" (79). Julie is seen by Strindberg to be "tragic, revealing a desperate fight against nature" (79). Strindberg's Hegelian notion that the oppression of woman was inevitable and the critical conflict with the individualist spirit of the modern world is Ibsen's starting point; enlarging the dialectic, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890) investigates a woman as a moral being who is both complicit with and strains

against the societal values which subjugate her, an image which represents an advancement over Strindberg's Julie; for Strindberg, modern woman was an aberration, a Darwinian monster, whose death re-assures her extinction.[6]

These binary oppositions which so neatly categorize women as consumed or stuck in nature and elevate man as the embodiment of culture begin to break down in the literary images of the hysteric, neurotic, and neurasthenic which arise in the second half of the 1800s. Hysteric and/or neurotic literature became one of the critical foci against the movement for the emancipation of woman from her designated roles of daughter, wife, and mother. Hugh Stutfield, in his 1895 article called

[6]Much can be said about the various treatments of female suicide in the nineteenth century. Not all of the women who commit suicide, such as Anna Karenina, Hedda Gabler, Miss Julie, Emma Bovary, and Bertha Mason, do so for either the same literal reason or for the same political reason. In some cases, the women are condemned by society. So common is the death of the transgressing heroine in nineteenth-century fiction that it has come to be seen as an obligatory nod to conventional morality which allows the author latitude for a sympathetic portrayal of his or her heroine or reveals the author's discomfort in affirming deviance. In other cases, the death of the heroine is determined by her inability to escape social convention--she chooses the nobility of death rather than the subjection of life.

"Tommyrotics," claims that the mental condition of such texts is "erotic, neurotic and Tommyrotic" and that society's most subtle foes are neuroticism and hysteria in its many forms (833). He sees a wave of unrest in humanity and sees revolt as the order of the day. Stutfield attributes this unrest to two problems; first, those people, usually women, who suffer from the ailments of neuroticism and hysteria suffer due to their desire to invent new social and political systems. Second, the decadent aristocracy, distressed that it could not solve the riddle of the universe, had also become neurasthenic. Specifically, Stutfield applauds Max Nordau's 1895 text, *Degeneration,* in which the hostile treatment of those writers of the decadent school of writing emphasizes Stutfield's own belief that the *Zeitgeist* is poisoned by the foulness and hysteria of modern literature. The odious literature to which Stutfield and Nordau refer is a less lovely offspring of hysteria, which they label as feminine:

> Perhaps the threat of this fiction lies in the introspection of female authors and their characters who search for new thrills and sensations, and they possess a maddening faculty of dissecting and

> probing their "primary impulses"...because they are so concerned that there is nothing so dreadful in its nakedness as the heart of man. (Mix 65)

Many of the qualities of mid to late-nineteenth century literary texts can be seen as symptomatic narratives that reflect and articulate the problematics of sexual difference and the societal struggles of each sex in the quest for personal and social recognition; in fact, Toril Moi has pointed out that Freud was not a neutral listener,[7] but an analyst who saw analysis as "armed combat," a struggle between the analyst and the patient in which "what is at stake in the narrative struggle is the right to claim one's own knowledge as truth" (82).

[7]Even Charcot concluded that case studies of hysterics were just as important in revealing the constructions of normative gender representation and encoded ideals of normal and abnormal as were the female case studies/narratives in the discussions of repressive social conventions. These images of women in fiction explore those women who do not wish to be complicit with the restrictions placed upon them by society. In the case of the hysteric (or later the New Woman), she is unable to give adequate expression to her selfhood or to find fulfilment in the narrow circumscribing compass of the social definitions available to her; consequently, she (or any person who suffers from the same moment of crisis) is not able to find a conceptually clear sense of herself in the available socially defined roles. Her quest becomes one to find an identity that is equal to her selfhood so that she will not remain a frustrated personality.

Perhaps more problematically, women's self-expression is severely limited by the previously detailed conventions; consequently, the categories, concepts and normative determinations are internalized, and

> [w]hen man makes of woman the *Other*, he may, then, expect her to manifest deep-seated tendencies toward complicity. Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the *Other* (Beauvoir xxvii)

to man's subjective selfhood.

Eventually, some women writers began to rage against their own complicity; however, rather than dismissing these women as suffering from a "female malady,"[8] a reconsideration of "neurotic" as "adhering to a different reality of things " (OED) may facilitate a differentiation between Stutfield's pessimism and a retention of the terms "hysteria" and "neuroticism" in a

[8]I borrow this term from Elaine Showalter's 1985 study, *The Female Malady*, which discusses the Victorian understanding of female madness and its portrayal in fiction (7).

positive way. It is clear that many of the women in fiction and reality of the nineteenth-century suffered from their intense desire to see social and political conventions change in order to empower their intellect rather than being only bodily entities which are silenced and hystericized when acted upon by individual men and patriarchal society in general. For a woman, nineteenth-century ideas of hysteria and/or neuroticism can be reconceptualized in terms of an illness which results from being constrained in and by social and linguistic constructs, as well as systems of thought which deny the possibility of the individual woman defining for herself what it is to be a person in the face of engendered social dialectics that oppose the male/metaphysical or intellectual to the female/physical. These neuroses are equally a manifestation of the desire to reconstruct or reconceive social convention which are a result of the pressure to locate oneself in an alienating universe.

In *Essentially Speaking*, Diana Fuss reminds the feminist reader why re-visionist readings of texts which figure woman as immanent in nature are important to the various traditions of literary canonization. My consideraton of women in decadence will consider male-

authored decadence's

> Images of beautiful women...[who] do not merely *figure* the poet's introspection....Rather, the ability to represent these aspects of Aestheticism through images of femininity is what makes it possible for Aestheticist artists to think them and perform them at all. (Psomiades 33)

As a result, one must not assume that the innate or given essences which sort women into various conventional roles in fiction are valid; it is not so important to ask if a male-authored decadent text is essentialist, but rather, "if this text is essentialist, *what motivates its deployment*?" (my italics, Fuss xi).

Chapter Two

Male-Authored Decadents/ce

> Once satisfied to control her body and her movements, once pleased to create images of her and then order her body to conform, the Master of Discourse now aspires to the most divine of tasks: to create her in his image, which is ultimately to annihilate her. This is his narcissistic solution to his problem of the Other.
>
> --Somer Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers* 16

My discussion of the many essentializing gestures found in nineteenth-century texts's disruptive images of women attempts to contest the traditional assumption that woman is closer to the pulse of nature than man. The construction or *deployment* of an essentialized woman through literary conventions may in fact reveal certain fears, anxieties, and desires of men, as well as the complicity of women in their own othering in history and culture. During a period in which gender norms were in the process of being protested and redefined, an identification with the feminine begins to permeate much

of the writing of the male European avant-garde and the literature of decadence. This feminization of literature is exemplified in a destabilization of traditional models of male identity, and is linked to an emerging self-conscious aestheticism that casts itself in opposition to realist and naturalist conventions. In an attempt to expose the natural assumptions of the dominant culture as artifice, the male artist drew upon stylistic and thematic motifs coded as feminine in order to challenge both sexual and textual norms. Necessary to the project of defining female decadence is the first step of understanding male decadent texts as well as the representation of men and, most importantly, women in those texts.

The feminization of male texts was, of course, only one of the ways in which gender identities were being reconstituted; predominantly, feminist movements in various European countries were vocal in their organized demands that women be allowed greater access to the public sphere. For this reason, nineteenth-century discourses often linked the feminized aesthete and the New Woman as twin symbolsof the decadence of the age and as focal points of contemporary anxiety about changing

gender roles and women's sexuality.[1] Male-authored decadent texts and the images of women in those texts construct an image of woman as *femme fatale*, passive vessel, or a devouring natural woman. In order to theorize and/or define if decadence is possible for a woman, one must begin with the fact that the male decadent stance exemplified by such writers as Joris-Karl Huysmans, George du Maurier, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and Oscar Wilde is anti-nature and anti-female in its pose.

One of the most common ways to signal gender ambiguity is in the sphere of sexuality. Many of the male-authored texts which were and are often designated as decadent explore a variety of sexual roles and options: male masochism, homosexuality,[2] transvestism, voyeurism, and fetishism. The Romantic yearning for

[1]For a concise discussion of this topic, see Linda Dowling's "The Decadent and the New Woman" in *Nineteenth Century Fiction* (1979): 434-453, and its relevance to female decadence in Chapter Four.

[2]Richard Dellamora's text, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (1990), is an intense discussion of issues of men, homosexuality, and desire in the work of authors ranging from Tennyson, Hopkins and Pater to Swinburne, Arnold and Gautier, and their importance to contextualizing these issues in male-authored decadence.

unmediated pleasure is radically undermined in these decadent texts; desire, instead of being repressed by the constraints of convention, is constituted through it. One such example of the aestheticization of the erotic is particularly apparent in Sacher-Masoch's text, *Venus im Pelz*[3], published in 1870, where sexual desire is generated and mediated through diverse forms of textuality: letters, contracts, books, painting, statues, and elaborate theatrical rituals. In fact, Gilles Deleuze makes the point in his commentary and translation of Sacher-Masoch's text in *Masochism* that it is no longer the hetero/sexual act that is portrayed as exciting, but the elaborately posed, static image of the fur-clad woman:

> The woman torturer freezes into postures that identify her with a statue, a painting or a photograph. She suspends her gestures in the act of bringing down the whip or removing her furs; her movement is arrested as she turns to look at herself in a mirror. (Sacher-Masoch 33)

[3]The translation used here of *Venus in Furs* is contained in Deleuze's *Masochism* (1991), which uses the French title, *La Vénus à la Fourrure*.

References to mirrors are an interesting link between male and female decadence; in addition to the continuous references to characters within decadent texts as Narcissists or as narcissistic, many characters in such texts as Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, Alcott's *Modern Mephistopheles*, and Rachilde's *Monsieur Venus* consistently gaze into mirrors and see themselves as portraits viewed not only by themselves but by other mentors/artists. Alternatively, the characters are imitative creations of artists whose imagination is conditioned by classical literature and are made to represent the characters of antiquity in statues, *tableaux*, and portraits. In *Venus in Furs*, the fetishistic fixation on costumes and the ritualized representation of static erotic *tableaux* derives from the pleasures of a masochistic fantasy which is created by its self-conscious and contemplative aestheticism, while the contemplation of women in eroticized portraits or as dead, aestheticized objects of the male gaze permeates many decadent texts.

The mid- to late-nineteenth century saw a proliferation of works that specifically link the realm of the aesthetic to the "feminized" or "effeminate" male

subject who displays traits which the dominant ideologies of his day identified with woman: passivity, languidness, vanity, hyper-sensitivity, a love of fashion and ornamentation. In *Reading in Detail*, Naomi Schor has pointed out the long-standing and often pejorative association of femininity with ornamentation and detail in Western culture. Specifically, Schor articulates the existence of a nexus between femininity and a self-consciously decorative and antirealist/decadent[4] aesthetic. Such an association is by no means self-evident, since the equation of women with the natural and the organic is well established in bourgeois ideology where woman is identified with a nostalgic plenitude that compensates man for the alienating experience of modernity. There is a clear difference between this set of symbolic configurations which remains influential throughout the nineteenth century and the later identification of femininity with neurosis, artifice, ornamentation, ennui, degeneration and decadence. In sentimental and early Romantic literature, the feminine

[4] I do not mean to suggest that decadence does not usurp certain aspects of realist stylistics; rather, I highlight the alignment of decadence with anti-realism in terms of decadence's desire to disrupt the conventional.

is linked with an expressive aesthetic that provides a vehicle for the cultivation and articulation of feeling, while the later-nineteenth century becomes associated with aestheticism, parody, and preoccupation with surface and style.

One of the main factors contributing to this phenomenon was the symbolic polarization of science and art through gender dualisms drawn from the division of private and public spheres; in this social context, the aesthetic became increasingly feminized, but not feminine, in relation to the Apollonian rationality of the scientific (i.e., traditional male) worldview. The motif of the feminized male functions as a symbol of decadence and degeneration that could be positioned against Victorian models of optimism and evolutionary progress. Some contemporary reviewers criticized *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* for its unmanliness and "effeminate frivolity" (Gagnier 59); however, self-identified decadents found men growing more refined and more feminine with one source of this over-refinement

found in the dandy tradition.[5] Both devotees and critics of decadence drew on a common vocabulary of such binary oppositions as normal/abnormal, natural/unnatural, masculine/feminine, healthy/diseased; nevertheless, decadence was deeply suffused by Darwinian notions of evolutionary development and regression.[6] The distinctive features of late-nineteenth-century aestheticism's preference for exotic and perverse subject matter over social realism was condemned in Nietzsche's wake by writers like Max Nordau as a cultural symptom of a pervasive degeneration and societal neurosis.[7] For supporters, the paradoxical modernity of aestheticism lay in rejecting ideals of reason, progress, and masculinity

[5]Jessica Feldman's text, *Gender on the Divide*, explores this topic in fiction, from Baudelaire and Gautier to Woolf.

[6]For an excellent discussion of phrenology, Darwinism and sociological commentary, see Daniel Pick's text, *Faces of Degeneration.*

[7]It is appropriate here to note that R. Kingcaid's *Neurosis and Narrative* explores Freud's theories and male-authored decadent texts; however, I would like to see her analysis taken further to include how Freud's idealization of, say, Dora, in his own narrative of her case history could be considered a decadent text. A recent monograph by Patrick J. Mahony, *Freud's Dora: A Psychoanalytic, Historical, and Textual Study* (1996) deals with some of these issues as well as claims that this case study is not a model of treatment but a remarkable exhibition of the rejection of a patient by a clinician mired in counter-transference.

in a defiant celebration of perversity.

Masculinity, then, defines the normal. The correlative of this supposition is to undermine the value of its opposite: femininity. If masculine means active, then it logically ensues that the feminine must signify passive, a belief that is extended beyond the scope of the linguistic in an attempt to make this binary opposition express the natural and ideal relative positions of the sexes in socially constructed reality. Accordingly, the feminine serves a specific function; it signals a formal, as well as thematic, refusal of an entire cluster of values that are conventionally associated with bourgeois masculinity. From an antinaturalist standpoint, gender, as one of the central categories of social and symbolic organization, provides a key terrain on which to challenge dominant definitions of what is constructed as real. Feminine traits, when adopted by a man, are defamiliarized and recognized as free-floating signifiers rather than as natural, God-given, and immutable attributes, yet are not seen as such when conventional male traits may be adopted by a woman. The feminized male deconstructs conventional oppositions between the modern man and the natural woman; he is male

but disassociated from masculine utility and progress; feminine but profoundly unnatural. Whether hailed as subversive or condemned as pathological, his male effeminacy signifies an unsettling of automatized perceptions of gender, whereas feminine qualities in a woman merely confirm her incapacity to transcend her natural condition of corporeal immanence. Richard von Krafft-Ebing claims that masochism can only be seen as a true perversion in men because women have a natural and "an instinctive inclination to voluntary subordination" (Dijkstra 101). As a result, the semiotic significance of feminine characteristics are fundamentally altered when appropriated by the male aesthete.

The male decadent's usurpation of gender norms and his adoption of feminine traits paradoxically reinforces his distance from and elevation above women, who are thought to be, by nature, incapable of intellectual mobility and aesthetic sophistication; for him, both art and women are decorative, functionless, and illusory. Paradoxically, the decadent, such as Des Esseintes in Huysmans's *À Rebours*,[8] who is in pursuit of uniqueness

[8]The translation used here, *Against Nature*, is by Robert Baldick for PBC, 1992.

through his narcissism, sees women as the mundane standard for the uniformity and standardization of modern life that he most abhors. Similarly, Dorian Gray explains his passion for Sybil Vane in his contrast of the idealized glamour of the actress with the ordinariness of real women who

> are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. One knows their minds as easily as one knows their bonnets. One can always find them. There is no mystery in any of them.... They have their stereotyped smile, and the fashionable manner. They are quite obvious. (Wilde 1992: 76)

In both texts, the superficiality and interchangeability of women symbolize an abstract identity and an all-pervasive disenchantment from the world in which sexuality, like art, has been deprived of its aura, and contaminated by everyday life.

Such descriptions emphasize the mechanical, depersonalized, and ultimately soulless, quality of what the male decadent perceives as modern femininity; consequently, women are seen literally to embody a natural and excessive emotionality that is seen as essential to their sex and which is antithetical to the

controlled self-consciousness of the aesthete. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* includes many negative comments regarding woman's tiresome sentimentality as well as their subjection to feelings beyond their control because "Women [live] on their emotions. They only [think] of their emotions" (Wilde 1992: 120).[9] The point is made in *Venus in Furs* that woman's failure is that

> In spite of all the advances of civilization, woman has remained as she was the day Nature's hands shaped her....Man, even when he is selfish or wicked, lives by principles; woman only obeys her feelings. (Sacher-Masoch 192)

Dorian Gray articulates his desire to master any residual emotion with the assumption that "A man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them" (Wilde 1992: 138). In this yearning for self-sufficiency and control, the male decadent position

[9]Milan V. Dimic has rightly pointed out that it is not without its ironies that Oscar Wilde, as a persecuted homosexual, will so easily espouse such misogynistic clichés of the "naturalness" of woman's emotive capacity when he himself suffered from assumptions of what is natural versus perverse/immoral.

demonstrates its underlying close affinity or sympathetic self-identification with the rationalist, asexual, scientific world-view against which it defines itself; thus, Wilde's Henry Wotton has a purely aesthetic appreciation of life which is compared in its disinterestedness and detachment to that of a surgeon, and Huysmans's Des Esseintes positions himself as an ironic and detached observer, not only of his own inner psychological processes, but also of the lives of others which, under his weary scrutiny, seem nothing more than *cliché*-ridden works of art.

In this same context, Charles Baudelaire's assertion that the artist stems only from himself can be read as the ideology of the self-sufficient male subject which is found in the disengaged sensibility of the detached aesthete. This fear of emotional ties as a potential threat to autonomous subjectivity suggests deeper anxieties about sexuality and the body; a sublimating impulse is apparent in the decadent's fantasy of transcending one's sexual and mortal body that is associated with putrefaction and decay, an impulse which In "The Decadent Subject," Charles Bernheimer identifies with the decadent subject's obsessive fear of the female

body as an insistent subtext in Huysmans' work and detects castration anxiety in the association of female sexuality with pervasive corruption and decay (57).

The theme is also evident in *Against Nature* where, as Rodolphe Gasché notes, Des Esseintes lives against nature as a means of transcending to "achieve a purity independent from the senses" (195). These various male anxieties about sexuality are frequently projected onto women so that the female body comes to function as a primary symbolic site for the confrontation and control of any threat of an unruly or chaotic nature. If male decadents aspire to create the ideal, then women, according to the dualisms of nineteenth-century thought, represent the material and corporeal "triumph of matter over mind" (Wilde 1992: 72). In the same way that the objectivity of scientific discourse relies, as theorists such as Elaine Showalter and Michel Foucault have shown,[10] on metaphors of subjugating and dominating feminized nature, the disinterested contemplation of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon conceals a subtext of anxiety and repressed violence. Matei Calinescu's

[10]I refer here to their respective texts, *The Female Malady* (1985) and *The History of Sexuality* (1979/1990).

description of Des Esseintes's aestheticism as a violation of nature, a consuming desire to "thwart, chastise and finally humiliate nature" (172), hints at the psychosexual aggression which underlies the persistent association of women and nature in nineteenth-century writing.

Contrary to the reification of the female body's naturalness, Huysmans's Des Esseintes describes the journey of the male decadent as purely cerebral. In Des Esseintes's description of Baudelaire, along with many other decadent male characters, cerebral activity is a substitute for spontaneous action:

> Literature, in fact, had been concerned with virtues and vices of a perfectly healthy sort, the regular functioning of brains of a normal conformation, the practical reality of current ideas, with never a thought for morbid depravities and other worldly aspirations....Baudelaire had gone further; he had descended to the bottom of the inexhaustible mine.... There, near the breeding ground of intellectual aberrations and diseases of the mind--the mystical tetanus, the burning fever of lust, the typhoids and yellow fevers of crime--he had

> found...ennui, the frightening climacteric of thoughts and emotions. He had laid bare the morbid psychology of the mind that had reached the October of its sensations...he had shown how blight affects the emotions at a time when the enthusiasms and beliefs of youth have drained away, and nothing remains but the barren memory of hardships, tyranny and slights, suffered at the behest of a despotic and freakish fate. (Huysmans 146)[11]

Past the petty concerns of humanism, Huysmans believes

[11]"C'était, au demeurant, l'excellente santé des vertus et des vices, le tranquille agissement des cervelles communément conformées, la réalité pratique des idées courantes, sans idéal de maladive dépravation, sans au-delà...Baudelaire était allé plus loin; il était descendu jusqu'au fond de l'inépuisable mine, s'était engagé à travers des galeries abandonnées ou inconnues, avait abouti à ces districts de l'âme où se ramifient les végétations monstrueuses de la pensée.

Là, près de ces confins où séjournent les aberrations et les maladies, le tétanos mystique, la fièvre chaude de la luxure, les typhoïdes et les vomitos du crime, il avait trouvé, couvant sous la morne cloche de l'ennui, l'effrayant retour d'âge des sentiments et des idées.

Il avait révélé la psychologie morbide de l'esprit qui a atteint l'octobre de ses sensations; raconté les symptômes des âmes requises par la douleur, privilégées par le spleen; montré la carie grandissante des impressions, alors que les enthousiasmes, les croyances de la jeunesse sont taris, alors qu'il ne reste plus que l'aride souvenir des misères supportées, des intolérances subies, des froissements encourus, par des intelligences qu'opprime un sort absurde." (Huysmans 1903: 183-184)

Baudelaire has descended into the Dionysian realm in order to exhaust its seemingly limitless excitations, emerging purged of all that might have previously been considered essential or natural. Baudelaire "had succeeded in expressing the inexpressible" (Huysmans 148)[12] through the knowledge he has gleaned from the limits of experience which leads him to the rejection of nature and to the necessity of the male decadent's rejection of the female gender. Further, Baudelaire believes that "Woman is the opposite of the dandy. Therefore she must inspire horror" because "Woman is natural, that is to say abominable" (Paglia 430).[13]

In this conceptualization of decadence where masculinity is accorded the norm, but femininity is appropriated by the aesthete or decadent male, can decadence be seen as "female" rather than merely as feminine or effeminate, and if so, one must wonder where the decadent women are who imagine or exemplify such a possibility. There are several women who appear within

[12]"Baudelaire...était parvenu à exprimer l'inexprimable" (Huysmans 1903: 185).

[13]For an extreme example of the abomination of female nature which inspires horror in the male viewer, see Baudelaire's "Une Charogne."

the decadent arts of representation; according to Jennifer Birkett, "Woman's place, for the artists and writers of the decadence, was inside the work of art, [only as] an *image to fix the male imagination*" (my italics, 159). These static images of women are constructed by the decadent male imagination and they come in almost every imaginable shape and size: vampires, muses, virgins, lesbians, whores, Venuses, Medusas, Liliths, Salomes, and Trilbys, or, finally, as statues and portraits;[14] however, they are decidedly not the sort of women which a man ought to choose as wife, nor are they fit to be mother, sister, or daughter in respectable society. Only the male subject/author is seen to be sufficiently privileged to create himself, while the female is relegated to the role of symbolic catalyst for the male author to achieve his desired approximation of ecstasy or bliss, rather than being the possessor of her own destiny. The symbolic woman of the decadent

[14]Each of these images of woman as constructed by the male decadent is worthy of full consideration which my space here does not permit. However, I also believe the image of the androgyne or sexually ambiguous Mademoiselle de Maupin in Théophile Gautier's text of the same name could be illuminating in the context of a discussion of the female decadent subject.

imagination depends for her existence, meaning, and sexuality on the male artist rather than on her intrinsic qualities; in this aesthetic, her creation is only completed by her passive cooperation with the male creator. Her definition as decadent within this discourse is merely a result of her deviation from masculinity, and it posits her as the negative or lacking position in discourse.

The feminization of the male aesthetic runs parallel to the aestheticization and de/resexualization of woman. Woman is identified with the primitive, uncontrollable forces of nature, in that "She is like a wild animal, faithful or faithless, kindly or cruel, depending on the impulse that rules her" (Sacher-Masoch 192); at the same time, she is aestheticized so that the threat of the natural is negated in its metamorphosis into art. The female body is transformed into an aesthetically and visually pleasing play of surfaces and textures under the scrutiny of the voyeuristic, and sometimes deadly, male who gazes rather than interacts. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait" contains a male narrator who appreciates the beauty of his surroundings, including the portrait which hangs hidden in a wall recess until a light

illuminates the portrait of "a maiden of rarest beauty...hating only the Art which was her rival" (Poe 252). While musing upon the description of her that he finds in a "volume which discussed the paintings and their histories" (Poe 252), the voyeuristic narrator languidly gazes upon the woman and, in a detached manner, contemplates her fate. The maiden is ignored by her artist lover, who "was a passionate, and wild and moody man, who became lost in reveries" (Poe 252) and orgiastically paints her idealized image; at the climactic moment of its completion, the "painter stood entranced before the work," realizing "this is indeed *Life* itself" purchased at the cost of "his beloved:--*She was dead*!" (Poe 253). Similarly, if not as drastically in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Sybil Vane is reduced to a collection of dramatic performances, a collection of characters acknowledged to be more real than the performer herself because the "girl never really lived, and so she has never really died" (Wilde 1992: 133), just as du Maurier's Trilby is the automated vessel of Svengali's Wagnerian music; he "flashed a pair of languishing black eyes at [Trilby] with intent to kill" (du Maurier 12) her soul in search of his decadent art.

"[Svengali] had but one virtue--his love of his art; or, rather, his love of himself as a master of his art--*the* master" (du Maurier 32) and "dread powerful demon" (du Maurier 75) of her mesmerised shame, voice and fear. Du Maurier crystallizes the destructive nature of the decadent male vision of woman:

> And underneath, that poor, sweet, soft, pathetic thing of flesh and blood, the eternal woman--great heart and slender brain--forever enslaved or ensláving, never self-sufficing, never free...that dear, weak, delicate shape, so cherishable, so perishable, that I've had to paint so often, and know so well by heart! and love...ah, how I love it! Only painter-fellows and sculptor-fellows can ever quite know (150),

the limited nature of woman that creates the male artist's "dreary scepticism--his own unhappy portion of *la maladie du siècle*" (du Maurier 151). Trilby's life as artistic vessel ends in destruction with her return to hystericized silence; although "tuneless and insane, she [is] more of a siren than ever" (du Maurier 219) to the men who drain her for their art.

Perhaps the most powerful example in male decadent

texts of female sexuality that is ultimately negated belongs to Salome, the Jewish princess. One need only consider the multiplicity of her images by such artists as Aubrey Beardsley, Huysmans, Gustav Klimt, Gustave Moreau, Richard Strauss, and Wilde to realize the power which she held over the male imagination. For the male decadent artist, the image of woman that Salome comes to represent is "the symbolic incarnation of world-old Vice, the goddess of immortal Hysteria[15]...a monstrous Beast of the Apocalypse, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning" (Huysmans 65)[16] to all those men surrounding her. The story was first recorded in the New Testament Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark where a young, unnamed girl, referred to only as the daughter of Herodias, dances and requests the head of John the Baptist at her mother's bidding. It is not until the first-century account of her by the Jewish historian

[15]I believe that a fascinating article could be done that explores and compares images of Salome with case studies of women in Freud and Breuer's *fin-de-siècle* text, *Studien Über Hysterie* (*Studies on Hysteria*) published in 1895.

[16]"la deité symbolique de l'indestructible Luxure, la déesse de l'immortelle Hystérie...la Bête monstrueuse, indifférente, irresponsable, insensible, empoisonnante" (Huysmans 1903: 86).

Flavius Josephus that Herodias's daughter was identified by the name "Salomé." Gradually, she assumes more importance in the story and her fascination for writers and artists grew over the years to culminate in the nineteenth century, when Salomé becomes a *femme fatale*. The German poet Heinrich Heine reintroduced the Salome story into French literature with a translation of his own work, *Atta Troll*, which focusses on the figure of Hérodiade and does not even mention Salome. Heine's most important contribution to the legend is to suggest that she is in love with St. John the Baptist changing her Biblical motive to an erotic one. The eroticism introduced by Heine[17] is capitalized on in Moreau's paintings, *Salomé dansant devant Hérode* and *L'Apparition*.

These two paintings have been credited with inspiring not only Flaubert's "Hérodias" but also Huysman's *Against Nature*, Mallarmé's "Hérodiade," and Wilde's *Salomé*. Both paintings are overwhelming in the richness of their settings and their ornamentation. For Huysmans, Moreau was the painter who, more than any

[17]Helen Zagona has interestingly argued in her text, *The Legend of Salomé*, that Heine confuses Hérodiade with Salome (20).

other, expressed the decadent aesthetic. Des Esseintes, the hero of Huysmans' *Against Nature*, purchases both of Moreau's Salome paintings. It is through Des Esseintes' commentary on the paintings, as Arthur Symons has observed, that "the art of Moreau culminates, achieves itself, passes into literature" (76). Des Esseintes moves the paintings beyond their surface reality to fill in what the paintings only suggest, adding details, motion, and time to his descriptions. For Des Esseintes, *Salomé dansant devant Hérode* incarnates

> the dancing girl who extorts a cry of lust and lechery from an old man by the lascivious movements of her loins; who saps the morale and breaks the will of a king with the heaving of her breasts, the twitching of her belly, the quivering of her thighs. She had become, as it were...the accursed Beauty exalted above all other beauties by the catalepsy that hardens her flesh and steels her muscles [against]...everything that approaches her, everything that sees her, everything that she

touches. (Huysmans 65-66)[18]

It is Salome's sexual power makes her dangerously desirable to the impotent Des Esseintes as a fatal goddess. The innocently sexualized Salome offers perversity and exoticism enough to arouse even such a jaded dandy into consideration of a spiritual transcendence to other worlds. In *L'Apparition*, Salome is described by Des Esseintes as

> almost naked; in the heat of the dance her veils have fallen away...so that now she is clad only in wrought metals and translucent gems. A gorgerin grips her waist like a corselet, and like an outsize clasp a wondrous jewel sparkles and flashes in the cleft between her breasts; lower down, a girdle encircles her hips hiding the upper part of her thighs, against which dangles a gigantic pendant glistening with rubies and emeralds...every facet of every jewel catches fire; the stones burn brightly,

[18]"la fille qui rompt l'énergie, fond la volonté d'un roi, par des remous de seins, des secousses de ventre, des frissons de cuisses; elle devenait, en quelque sort...la Beauté maudite, élue entre toutes par la catalepsie qui lui raidit les chairs et lui durcit les muscles...tout ce qui l'approche, tout ce qui la voit, tout ce qu'elle touche" (Huysmans 1903: 86).

outlining the woman's figure in flaming colours...

(Huysmans 68)[19]

Des Esseintes, as the sole voyeur to the dance and the apparition, "felt overwhelmed, subjugated, stunned" at the image he perceives exemplifies woman as "a true harlot, obedient to her passionate and cruel female temperament" (Huysmans 68).[20] Aroused from his impotence, Ees Esseintes represents the male decadent who is "haunted by the symbols of superhuman passions and superhuman perversities, of divine debauches perpetrated without enthusiasm and without hope" (Huysmans 69)[21] but not by the dancing woman herself.

In the quest for Baudelaire's ideal mistress, the

[19]"Elle est presque nue; dans l'ardeur de la danse, les coiles se sont défaits...elle n'est plus vêtue que de matières orfévries et de minéraux lucides; un gorgerin lui serre de même qu'un corselet la taille, et, ainsi qu'une agrafe superbe, un merveilleux joyau darde des éclairs dans la rainure de ses deux seins; plus bas, aux hanches, une ceinture l'entoure, cache le haut de ses cuisses que bat une gigantesque pendeloque où coule une rivière d'escarboucles et d'émeraudes" (Huysmans 1903: 88-89).

[20]"des Esseintes demeurait écrasé, anéanti, pris de vertige...elle était vraiement fille; elle obéissant à son tempérament de femme ardente et cruelle" (Huysmans 1903: 89).

[21]"hanté par les symboles des perversités et des amours surhumaines, des stupres divins consommés sans abandons et sans espoirs" (Huysmans 1903: 91).

tangible woman of legend is transformed into an ideal. Fixed in place and objectified by the gaze of Herod, Herodias, Moreau, and Des Esseintes, Salome can never retaliate the gaze back upon the viewers. She is held prisoner for the male voyeur to contemplate, at safe remove, the intimidating vision of female sexuality. Once again, Salome has no momentary identity of her own, and the evil influence which she radiates is projected onto her by her audience: Des Esseintes. The images that he selects from the canvas systematically evacuate her of life; for example, the lotus flower in her hand, an image of fertile female sexuality, is twisted to an image of impurity and death. Further, Des Esseintes's commentary dwells on symbols of male impotence, Herod and the Eunuch. The eyes of Herod and St. John the Baptist transfix Salome in a manner that terrifies her; her mask of divine self-possession is torn away, like the veils torn from her body in the dance, which leaves her struggling under the eyes of her male accusers, without voice in her own defense. Des Esseintes's arousal is at the vulnerability of her nakedness, not at the possible power of her sexuality and desire.

Wilde's famous play, *Salome*, did more than any other

single image or piece of writing to make Salome's story known as a synonym for pernicious sexual perversity. In Wilde's drama, a wholesale manipulation of the image of woman as aggressor serves as a cleansing rite of passage that is designed to expose her mindless nature and insatiable sexual need. Salome becomes the representation of chaotic nature as she tempts Herod into a homicidal bargain; Herod makes his promise to give Salomé whatever she wants if she will dance for him. As he does so, Herod sees that the vampire-moon (with which the virgin-predator Salome is equated[22]) has, in anticipation of what is to come, "become red. She has become red as blood" (Wilde 1985: 30). In perhaps the most notorious narrative gap of the nineteenth-century, "Salomé dances the dance of the seven veils" (Wilde 1985: 30). Upon completion of her performance, woman's perfidious bestial lust for blood surfaces as Salome, with the bidding of the moon, asks for the head of

[22]In Beardsley's drawings, Oscar Wilde is infamously drawn as the lecherous and leering "man" in the moon; perhaps, this is an attempt to question the assumption that woman's affinity for lunar cycles creates her as more natural. For the most erudite, contextualized and comprehensive discussion of the art of Beardsley, see Chris Snodgrass's *Aubrey Beardsley: Dandy of the Grotesque* (1995).

Jokanaan on a silver charger. Vindictively, Salome voices a condemnation of men and patriarchy: "I tell thee, there are not dead men enough" (Wilde 1985: 35-36). Once Salomé has been given the head of the prophet, her female destiny is brought to fulfilment:

> "I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor apples can appease my desire. What shall I do now, Jokanaan? Neither the floods nor the great waters can quench my passion. I was a princess, and thou didst scorn me. I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity away from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire...Ah! ah! wherefore didst thou not look at me? If thou hadst looked at me thou hadst loved me." (Wilde 1985: 37)

Salome's socially unacceptable passions make Herod shiver, and he resolves that he "will not look at things, [he] will not suffer things to look at [him]" (Wilde 1985: 38), particularly the "monstrous" (Wilde 1985: 37) Salome; however, the outrage of Salome's female desire continues as she rejects the immanence to which he condemns her. Salome emerges as vampiric woman, hungry for semen and the blood which feeds man's brain (Wilde

1985: 36). Herod demands that his soldiers "Kill that woman!" (Wilde 1985: 38) so that her body may serve as a sacrifice to the transcendent realm of the masculine spirit. It is the death of Wilde's Salome, later orgiastically and musically enhanced in Strauss's opera, that allows *fin-de-siècle* culture to complete its long, fantastic, ritualistic indictment of woman for her criminal demand for independent sexuality and desire and also allows for the progressive development of female decadents/ce.

Chapter Three

Concord Scheherazade:

Louisa May Alcott; or, "A. M. Barnard"?

> Insignificant as this action was, it spoke very plainly. It spoke very plainly of ever-recurring fears--of fatal necessities for concealment--of a mind that in its silent agonies was ever alive to the importance of outward effect. It told more plainly than anything else could have told how complete an actress my lady had been made by the awful necessity of her life.
>
> --Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* 197

In the spring of 1942, Leona Rostenberg's "wild warwoop [which] shattered the dignified silence of the manuscript room of Houghton Library" (Rostenberg 123) not only provoked the ire of a Harvard librarian, but also shook the foundations of a half-century of Alcott scholarship. Rostenberg had just discovered that Louisa May Alcott, a.k.a. the children's friend, had written prolifically between 1863 and 1870 under the pseudonym "A. M. Barnard" various types of "blood and thunder

tales"[1] and at least one full-length novel, *A Modern Mephistopheles*, for the No Name series in 1877. Self-professed to LaSalle Corbell Pickett as a "wretched victim to the respectable traditions of Concord" (Stern 1984: 42),[2] Alcott acknowledged her desire to escape those restraints:

> I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style. I indulge in gorgeous fancies and wish that I dared inscribe them upon my pages and set them before the public.... How should I dare to interfere with the proper grayness of old Concord? The dear old town has never known a startling hue since the redcoats were here. Far be it from me to inject an inharmonious color into the neutral tint. And my

[1]Alcott categorizes her own tales in her letter of June 22, 1862 to her friend Alfred Whitman: "I intend to illuminate the Ledger with a blood & thunder tale as they are easy to 'compoze' & are better paid than moral & elaborate works of Shakespeare, so dont be shocked if I send you a paper containing a picture of Indians, pirates wolves, bears & distressed damsels in a grand tableau over a title like this 'The Maniac Bride' or 'The Bath of Blood. A thrilling tale of passion,' &c." (*SL* 79).

Throughout this chapter, I have preserved Alcott's punctuation and American spelling when quoting her letters, journals or texts.

[2]Disclosed by Alcott in a conversation to Pickett which was reprinted in *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott* from *Across My Path: Memories of People I Have Known*. ed. M. Stern. New York: Brentano's, 1916. 107-108.

> favorite characters! Suppose they went to cavorting at their own sweet will, to the infinite horror of dear Mr. Emerson.... To have had Mr. Emerson for an intellectual god all one's life is to be invested with a chain armor of propriety. (Stern 1984: 42)

Like many other female artists of the nineteenth century, the anonymity granted to Alcott through the use of her pseudonym allowed for a critical, radical, visionary and revisionary impulse in her fiction.[3]

Due to the continued enthusiasm of literary sleuths Leona Rostenberg and her life-long intellectual partner, Madeleine Stern, Alcott's pseudonymous texts have been continuously published once finally excavated from the pages of history. World War II necessitated the protection of the complete run of several periodicals in

[3]There is general agreement regarding Alcott's choice of pseudonym as initially suggested by Leona Rostenberg in "Some Anonymous and Pseudonymous Thrillers of Louisa M. Alcott:" "This name may have been suggested either by fancy or a chain of associations. The A may have been derived from any one of the family names, Amos, Abba or Anna. The M more than likely represented her mother's maiden name, May...Her father claimed Henry Barnard, the Connecticut schoolmaster, as a close friend and the suitability of this surname may have attracted his inspired daughter" (Stern 1984: 44).

With her choice of an androgynous pseudonym, Alcott did not follow in her contemporaries footsteps in re-creating herself as a male, although her critics made that assumption for her.

which A. M. Barnard published, such as *The Flag of Our Union*, in the vaults of the Library of Congress; although Rostenberg announced her findings in the article "Some Anonymous and Pseudonymous Thrillers of Louisa M. Alcott"[4] in 1943, it was not until the publication of Stern's first edited collection, *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*, in 1975 that the general literary public had access to these tales. Since that time, a gradual awakening of interest by critics such as Judith Fetterley, Elizabeth Keyser, Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter and Madeleine Stern has led to interpretations of Alcott's tales as psychological catharsis and experimental sensationalism, but also, as Alcott later declared after writing *A Modern Mephistopheles*, as means of escape because she was "tired of providing moral pap for the young" (Cheney 296). Based on such comments, as well as the erotic and criminal preoccupations of her thrillers, critics such as Fetterley, Karen Halttunen, Martha Saxton, Showalter, and Stern argue that the author's double life and the hidden feminist rage that vented itself behind the mask of

[4]This article first appeared in *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*. 37(1943): 131-140.

anonymous publication represents irrefutable evidence that these texts are Alcott's most genuine articulations of her true, albeit "masked" self. Halttunen claims that

> [like] her Gothic heroines, [Alcott] too was assuming a mask of propriety, which concealed her own illicit ambitions and desires.... If Alcott sympathized with her Gothic heroines, it was because their sense of theatre as a disguise for the demonic self was her own. Her respectability, she knew, was a charade: her inner demons were not defeated but only masked... . (242)

Biographically, Stern outlines a method of interpretation for the thrillers which has prevailed in Alcott scholarship:

> [Alcott's] own anger at an unjust world she transformed into the anger of her heroines who made of it a powerful weapon with which to challenge fate. The psychological insights of A. M. Barnard disclose the darker side of the character of Louisa May Alcott... . (Stern 1975: xxx)

Martha Saxton's controversial biography takes this line of biographical interpretation of Alcott's fiction one step further; Saxton suggest that Alcott was the victim

of a type of schizophrenic consciousness that prevented her ability to integrate emotionally her various personae of obedient daughter, bread-winner, and adoptive mother. Saxton sees the stories as a place where a sexually undeclared introverted

> [Alcott] didn't need to be responsible for a morality, an expected metaphysic, or a righteous ending. Her characters could behave with the violence, anger and ruthlessness that she kept tightly locked away. Her women could behave without regard to Concord ethics or Victorian claims of femininity. (261)

I am ill at ease to ascribe such direct correspondences from fiction to person or vice versa as a critical method; however, I find that, in a particularly clever slight of hand, Elaine Showalter has posited the potentiality of Alcott's self-taught ambidexterity as a

metaphor for her dual life as a writer,[5] a speculation which may be more useful to understanding Alcott's complex fiction.

These same critics continually stress the importance of a re-examination of these unknown thrillers by scholars, particularly feminist scholars, for their investigation of the gendered hostilities, value systems and power struggles that further elucidate the roles of woman and woman writer in nineteenth-century America. In addition, they agree that Alcott's texts are subtly subversive; however, I would argue that the significance of the texts is not limited to the genre of sensationalism, but that many of Alcott's stories are early examples of female decadent texts.

When Madeleine Stern labels Alcott the "Concord Scheherazade" (Stern 1976: 25), she inadvertently creates

[5]Showalter's editorial introduction to her *Alternative Alcott* offers the following: "In the late years of her career, pressured by the demands of her readers and her publishers for more work from the pen that had given them the best-selling *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott taught herself to write with her left hand. Ambidexterity allowed her to keep to her desk twice as long, to produce twice as much, in short, to become a doubly efficient writing machine. But Alcott's ambidexterity also appears as a striking physical metaphor for her creativity" (Showalter 1988: ix).

a parallel between the author's dual literary personae and the palimpsestic layering of the texts. The masked or veiled thrillers detail thematic concerns, stylistic traits and character portrayals which go far beyond the concerns of little women. In addition to her detailed critiques of the respective roles of the sexes in nineteenth-century American society, Alcott explores decadent themes and motifs such as, but not limited to, degeneration ("A Nurse's Story" 1866); performance ("La Jeune; or, Actress and Woman" 1868); mesmerism ("A Pair of Eyes; of, Modern Magic" 1863); hysteria, neurasthenia and ennui ("A Whisper in the Dark" 1863 and "Freak of a Genius" 1866); transvestism/masquerade ("Enigmas" 1864); passionlessness voyeurism ("Pauline's Passion and Punishment" 1863); exoticism ("Taming a Tartar" 1867); as well as drug experimentation ("Perilous Play" 1869).[6] Stylistically akin to male-authored decadent texts, Alcott's works are intertextual and self-consciously referential to both literature and art; texts, decor, textiles, *tableaux vivants*, painting and sculptures delicately weave a critique of the social structures--

[6]Several of Alcott's texts include any number of these decadent themes; they are not limited to a one to one ratio, nor are all of the relevant stories listed here.

particularly gender relations within male-authored decadent texts--which she exploits in her narratives to create a blueprint for female decadent texts.

In May and June of 1865, Alcott published "A Marble Woman; or, The Mysterious Model"[7] in James R. Elliott's *The Flag of Our Union*. Shaped by the author's understanding of both her own art of writing and her sister, May's, training in the arts of drawing and painting, "A Marble Woman" confronts the patriarchal culture that would construct woman in such a way as to immobilize her--in this case, as a statue, in other cases as a woman aestheticized and eroticized by death. Bram Dijkstra makes several relevant comments on the relationship of the decadent male's fetishization of the ideal female through his langourous descriptions of her white skin pallor, invalid condition, and consumptive passivity where the "passive whiteness of moonlight and the sterile glazing of wax were the perfect textures with which to create the ideal women of the later nineteenth

[7]For simplicity, all page references to Alcott's short fiction will be taken from *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers* edited by Madeleine Stern, but will be denoted by the title of the story or by its direct abbreviation.

century" so they could be "as soundless, emotionless moonbeam[s]" (123-124). Using the type of Hellenism attributed to the later male decadents,[8] Alcott uses the motifs of Pygmalion and Galatea, as well as Cupid and Psyche, to develop a critique of the violence and sterility which result from men's efforts to mould women in a vain effort to shape themselves.

Cecilia Bazil Stein is the heroine of the tale who is left with her mother's former lover, Bazil Yorke, as her guardian upon the mother's death. A sculptor of genius who has never married, Bazil creates his statues in a tower studio. The long large room into which Cecil enters (in which she is interred) is "filled with busts, statues, uncut blocks, tools, dust, and disorder" ("The Marble Woman" 180) made from handfuls of clay. The gothic background is replete with ancient furniture, dark curtains, foreboding paintings and and there is a huge dog named Judas that sits on a tiger skin (MW 180), Cecil--as Bazil calls her--begins to interact with the man whose countenance betrays "traces of deep suffering,

[8]For a full-length discussion of Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and others and their literary idealization of Greek society, see Linda Dowling's *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford.* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994.

latent passion, and a strange wistfulness, as if the lonely eyes were forever seeking something they had lost" (MW 177) and who is "singularly sinister...in spite of its beauty" (MW 180). Bazil refuses to allow himself to love his young charge and declares that "If I had power to kill the savage beast, skill to subdue the fierce dog, surely I can mould the child as I will" (MW 183).

This destructive desire leads him to become master to his ward as he vampirically drains Cecil of her very life-energy so she becomes

> Colorless, like a plant deprived of sunshine, strangely unyouthful in the quiet grace of her motions, the sweet seriousness of her expression, but as beautiful as the Psyche and almost as cold (MW 183)

as the marble woman he wishes her to become. As it "was a fancy of York's...she dressed for him alone, unconscious that she served as a model for his fairest work" (MW 183). Rather than see the sculptures as his work, Cecil becomes Galatea to his Pygmalion, although he lacks "the art of warming and waking his Galatea" (MW 210). Instead, Bazil schools her in the Victorian charms of silence, obedience, self-control, and passionlessness, all of

which are masks that Cecil must wear, both in public and in private, in order to conceal the remnants of her existing personality. In a revealing moment, Bazil commands Cecil to

> "...be what I would have you."
>
> "A marble woman like your Psyche, with no heart to love you, only grace and beauty to please your eye and bring you honor; is that what you would have me?"
>
> He started, as if she had put some hidden purpose into words; his eye went from the gleaming statue to the pale girl, and saw that he had worked out his design in stone, but not yet in that finer material given him to mould well or ill. He did not see the pain and passion throbbing in her heart; he only saw her steady eyes; he only heard her low spoken question, and answered it, believing that he served her better than she knew.
>
> "Yes, I would have you beautiful and passionless as Psyche, a creature to admire with no fear of disturbing its quiet heart, no fear of endangering one's own." (MW 188)

The artworks created by Bazil and Cecil of Psyche and

Cupid and the inequality of their size and stature emphasize the destructive nature of their real-life relationship which has now moved from daughter/ward and pupil to wife for appearance's sake. In his attempts to control Cecil's sexuality through his Apollonian reason and restraint, Bazil creates, both in clay and flesh and blood, an image of Psyche that is self-serving. Looking with adoration upon the male statue, Psyche/Cecil reflects back the desiring gaze, but without authenticity because "As a work of art she is exquisite, but as [an idealized] woman she is a dead failure" (MW 209). The demands placed upon marble for human vivacity are equal to the inhuman demands placed upon Cecil; imprisoned, fossilized, and frozen by Bazil's deterministic view of life, despite the seductive nature of his studio, Cecil becomes the statue.

Alcott's commentary on the destructiveness of the use of woman as a subject for the objectification in male art condemns the practice as fraught with what Foucualt has exposed as "relations of power" (1990: 94) because is "Only from a self-consciously denaturalized position can we see how the appearance of naturalness is itself constituted" (Butler 110). Both Alcott's exposition of

the asymmetrical relationship between artist and art object, either statue or woman, and her continuous observations on the role of woman as actress draw the reader to conclude that "the sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a 'natural sex' or a 'real woman' or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions" (Butler 140)--social fictions that are not for/to the benefit of woman. To this end, Alcott introduces a favoured theme: the masquerade or the mask/masque. The masquerades which Alcott investigates are two-fold; first, the social fiction of the ideal woman which demands that she become an accomplished actress, and second, the use of the theatrical references at a costume party to expose social conventions as fraudulent representations of nature.

Cecil's inability to continue to represent the ideal reveals itself at a social event where she is required to be the perfect little woman. In order to endure the pressure of the evening as "Yorke's statue" (MW 209), Cecil secretly goes out into a storm in search of opium comfits. Unable to continue due to the weather, she returns home to remember a bottle of laudanum that Bazil keeps in the house for medicinal purposes. Once dressed

for the party and fortified by her opiate, Cecil is a "fair apparition" with "bridal pearls gathered up the dark hair" while "a white down-trimmed cloak half covered shoulders almost as fair, for Yorke adorned his living statue with a prodigal hand" (MW 209). After Bazil makes ready for the party, he sees that Cecil makes

> a pretty picture [in] the firelight...lying in a deep chair looking straight before her with a singular expression, dreamy, yet intense, blissfully calm, yet full of a mysterious brightness that made her face strangely beautiful...not until he touched her did she seem conscious of his presence. (MW 209)

Once at the party, Cecil is obedient to his command to imitate the devotion of Mrs. Vivian for her husband; Cecil "danced like a devotee, delighting and surprising those about by the gaiety and grace with which she bore her part in the brilliant scene" (MW 212). Cecil plays her with the assistance of "an evil spirit" (MW 212), which makes Bazil so unnerved that he longed to return home "For her spirits seemed unnatural to him" (MW 212). Left alone until morning, Bazil is astonished to see that

> A great change had come over her since he saw her last, a change that alarmed him terribly. The

> restless sleep had deepened into a deathlike immobility; the feverish flush was gone, and violet shadows gave her closed eyes a sunken look; through her pale lips slow breaths came and went... . (MW 213)

Dr. Home arrives to diagnose Cecil's ailment as an overdose of laudanum which would have killed a man, "but not a woman who had been taking opium for months," as a "whim, perhaps ennui" (MW 213) caused her to begin the habit. While Bazil waits for her to awaken, he reads De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in an attempt to understand her motives and needs. To his questions about her addiction, Cecil gives an honest answer:

> I find it hard to tame myself to the quiet, lonely life you wish me to lead. I am so young, so full of foolish hopes and fancies, that it will take time to change me entirely, and what I have seen of the world lately makes it still more difficult. (MW 215)

In effect, Cecil returns to her earlier admission that she can not become the actress/statue which Bazil desires. Her earlier performance is without passion:

"You gave me a part to play, and I am no actress, as you see. Is the masquerade over now?" (MW 194). No longer required to keep her bitter secret of the opium addiction that allows her to suppress her emotions, Cecil admits to her desire for the oblivion offered by the narcotic. To improve her health, Cecil and Bazil travel to the sea-side where he purchases a home filled with his statues; however, the discovery of the damage which he has caused to her (P)syche(s), both statue and mind, creates a change in the balance of power in their relationship because "[Cecil] ruled him, but seemed not to know it" (MW 224). In their new home, the couple decides to have a costume party for their friends.

Alcott's intertextual theatrical and historical references provide another commentary on the battle between the sexes for power. Cecil, Bazil and the mysterious Germain plan their costumes for the evening. Germain claims that he will not assume a costume because he does not have "spirits enough for it, but in a [black silk] domino can glide about" (MW 223) to eavesdrop on the guests under the cloak of inconspicuousness. The most telling conversation revolves around the suggestions of costuming for Bazil and Cecil. Cecil ironically

suggests that Bazil "had better personate Othello; the costume would be becoming, and the character an easy one for him to play, he is such a jealous soul" (MW 223), to which he responds that he prefers Hamlet's melancholia, but that Cecil "would succeed well as the princess in the fairy tale, who turned to stone whenever her husband approached her," or "Diana, as a cool character for a sultry summer evening" (MW 223-224).

Cecil rebels against assuming the representation of the unfeeling princess or of the celibate Roman goddess:

> I hate goddesses, having lived with them all my life. Everyone will expect me to be some classical creature or other, so I shall disappoint them, and enjoy myself like a mortal woman. (MW 224)

The mortal woman that Cecil chooses is a French marquise; the men respond with laughter until she silences them with her assertion that "I am a better actress than you think; I've had daily practice since I was married" (MW 224). She dresses in the exotic manner of the manipulative Marquise de Merteuil from Laclos's *Les*

Liaisons Dangereuses[9] in "a costume both becoming and piquant" with "powdered hair...sweeping brocades of violet and silver...rich lace...white plumes...,and a cluster of roses on her bosom" (MW 225). Still wishing to mould his statue's form, Bazil adds to her costume many jewels to prove to her that he has exquisite "taste in stones" (MW 225), ambiguously illuminating his aesthetic sensuality, his statuesque wife, and his idealized princess. Quoting Ophelia's hysterical words, Cecil returns the favour with a sterile, "flowerless sprig" demanding that Bazil should "wear [his] rue with a difference" (MW 225). Bazil's melancholy response to the various representations of woman by Cecil that "sometimes it is impossible not to mistake art for nature" (MW 224) is the crux of Alcott's tale. Woman, once constructed in the idealized image of a marble goddess, without emotion, sexuality or free will, is merely an inauthentic replica of art, but neither is the representation of woman as

[9]Alcott's "The Marble Woman" as well as *A Modern Mephistopheles* seem to make allusions to the text by Laclos; however, it has not yet been established by any scholar that she had, in fact, read his novel. The manipulation of Cecil's character at this point, from the innocent seducee to the seducer seems remarkable if read in conjunction with her costume.

purely *femme fatale* any more accurate. The use of Ophelia's words invokes unrequited love. Whether as a warning or a commentary, Alcott reminds us that Hamlet's scorn of Ophelia in spite of his love for her leads to her self-destruction, which once again demonstrates through fastidious intertextual references the impossibility of the continued inequality between Cecil and Bazil. These references illustrate that at least one motivating force behind Bazil's attempt to dominate or master Cecil is to shape her into a little woman who will appeal to his better nature and allow him to better master himself; his self-mastery and the consequent release of Cecil from his psychological grasp allow for Cecil's reunion with Germain, who, before he dies, is revealed to be her father and for her establishment as a subjective agent in her own right.

In October and November of 1866, Alcott pseudonymously published the story "Behind a Mask; or, A Woman's Power" in *The Flag of Our Union.* , Alcott creates an unorthodox narrative that, far from simply a formulaic sentimental plot, challenges middle-class conventional ideals of gender, femininity and domesticity. The progressive treatment of gender issues

inscribes, perhaps more extensively than any other of her short fictions, the broad social and philosophical concerns which create her subtexts. Through the decadent themes of masks/disguise, theatricality and performance, Alcott negates the epistemological verities of genteel mid-nineteenth century culture in an attempt to expose the fictitious construction of and cultural understanding of gender.

Heavily influenced by the tradition of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, "Behind a Mask; or, A Woman's Power" presents a governess, Jean Muir, who invades the domestic space of the wealthy Coventry family, which consists of the invalid mother, Mrs. Coventry, her sons, Gerald and Edward, her daughter, Bella, her niece, Lucia, who is engaged to Gerald, and the haughty master of the house Sir John Coventry. While they await Jean's arrival, the cynical elder brother, Gerald, announces that he has "an inveterate aversion to the whole tribe" (BM 361); whether he solely refers to governesses or to the entire realm of his social inferiors is unclear, but suggestive, as he declares that "Ned is just at an age to make a fool of himself for any girl who comes in his way," with an astute warning to Lucia to "[h]ave a care of the

governess...or she will bewitch him" (BM 362) because she is part of a "mischief-making race" (BM 377). Jean appears as a young orphan who seems to lack connections in spite of her obvious personal grace and comportment. Although we discover shortly that Jean is a radical deviation from the stereotype of benign governess and is, in fact, the ultimate impersonator, the family immediately finds her interesting and mysterious. More importantly, they

> all felt a touch of *pity* at the sight of the pale-faced girl in her plain black dress, with no ornament but a little silver cross at her throat. Small, thin, and colorless she was, with yellow hair, gray eyes, and sharply cut, irregular, but very expressive features. Poverty seemed to have set its bond stamp upon her, and life to have had for her more frost than sunshine. But something in the lines of the mouth betrayed strength, and the clear, low voice had a curious mixture of command and entreaty in its varying tones. Not an attractive woman, yet not an ordinary one: and, as she sat there with her delicate hands lying in her lap, her head bent, and a bitter look on her thin

face, she was more interesting than many a blithe and blooming girl. (My italics, "Behind a Mask" 361)

The reader soon learns that Jean is a thirty-year old, divorced actress who sees her employment with the Coventrys as her last opportunity to enchant and marry into wealth, power and prestige. With three eligible prospects of the eldest heir, the youthful son, and the present master available to her, Jean understands their contempt and their pity, but sets out to captivate the men with her efforts to become the embodiment of what each man most ardently responds to--whether it is purity, domesticity, or femininity.

While exploiting this ordinary nineteenth-century female charade of self-conscious construction, Jean exceeds the standard, or acceptable, role of woman. With decadent meticulousness to style and detail, Jean orchestrates her self-presentation and personal ornamentation in a manner which induces the family into accepting her as integral to the household. Jean responds to the family's gender and class prejudices; she appears young, vulnerable, subdued and is appropriately talented in the conventional feminine arts of sentimental music, drawing, and French. Throughout the tale, Jean's

"character [is] painted in glowing colors" (BM 384) by both narrator and characters, who continually recite the litany of womanly virtues she possesses. Whether a pathetic but "capital little woman" (BM 371) with Edward, "meek, modest, faithful" (BM 376) or "unobtrusive and retiring" (BM 376) of manner with Mrs. Coventry, she saves her most "respectful deference and...graceful little attentions...[for Sir John] in a frank and artless way" (BM 376). Jean proves herself, even to Gerald and Lucia, as a "well-bred, unassuming" (BM 372) lady of exceedingly pliable disposition who serves as mother, instructor, role model, companion, confidante and, most importantly, entertainer. With the "art of a devil" (BM 424), Jean becomes a false model and/or representative of the Victorian Cult of True Womanhood. Encouraged by the impossibility of a woman attaining in reality this ideal sought by patriarchal society, Alcott uses Jean to subvert the tradition in order to use the falsity of the ideal of womanhood as an instrument of ambition and revenge. Judith Fetterley's important article, "Impersonating 'Little Women': the radicalism of Alcott's *Behind a Mask*," observes that in order to understand and provide for the needs of all of the occupants of the

Coventry household, Jean must be supremely conscious and self-aware. The irony is that the naïvete ascribed to her is in fact incompatible with her role within the family dynamics (Fetterley 6).

Alcott exposes the hypocrisy of conventional and/or aristocratic femininity; in order to be the perfect model of artlessness for which the Coventrys so much admire her, Jean must be, as she is at the piano, a "perfect mistress of her art" (BM 363), "as well as an energetic young person, to discover [their] chief weakness and attack it" (BM 371). Alcott's usurpation of the ideal of the domestic and private sphere and her transformation of it into a revelation of art and artifice is stunning. Finally alone, Jean retires to her room where she "drew out a flask, and mixed a glass of some ardent cordial, which she seemed to enjoy extremely" and declares with passionate force, "I'll not fail again if there is power in a woman's wit and will!" (BM 367). Calmly, Jean refocusses her energy and remembers that "the curtain is down, so I may be myself for a few hours, if actresses ever are themselves" (BM 367). Her first Act complete, the dropping of Jean's mask brings about a startling metamorphoses from ideal to real woman:

> Still sitting on the floor she unbound and removed the long abundant braids from her head, wiped the pink from her face, took out several pearly teeth and slipping off her dress appeared herself indeed a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least. The metamorphoses was *wonderful*, but the disguise was more in the expression she assumed than in any art of costume or false adornment. Now she was alone, and her mobile features settled into their natural expression, weary, hard, bitter. She had been lovely once, happy, innocent, and tender: but nothing of all this remained to the gloomy woman who leaned there brooding over some wrong, or loss or disappointment which had darkened all her life. (My italics, BM 367)

Alcott's "wonderful" shows a significant cognizance of and an admiration for the art/artifice of womanhood.

A consummate actress, Jean keeps the fearsome, degenerate *femme fatale* captive behind a (re)presentation of morality and purity, while Alcott shows through her use of Jean's disguises and theatricality the fictitious nature of cultural codes of material appearance and illuminates for her reader the potential for an

individual's transformation and psychological alterity. Jean changes clothes and psyches:

> It had been a very warm day, and for the first time she had left off her plain black dress. All in white, with no ornament but her fair hair, and a fragrant posy of violets in her belt, she looked a different woman from the meek, nunlike creature one usually saw about the house. Her face was as altered as her dress, for now a soft color glowed in her cheeks, her eyes smiled shyly, and her lips no longer wore the firm look of one who forcibly repressed every emotion. A fresh, gentle, and charming woman she seemed, and Coventry found the dull room suddenly brightened by her presence. (BM 386)

From austere governess, to degenerate woman, Jean further self-transforms into a woman in white. Her assumption of the correct clothes or costume constitutes a new identity, since the accepted system of signs, once inverted, becomes arbitrary when stripped of its referential functions. At the very least, the mark exposes the sentimental equation between physical appearance and inner being as merely illusory. Men do

not love Jean per se; rather, they adore the idealized image which she creates through her artistry. We are given only one direct glimpse of her unmasked. Society's various conceptions of the female gender cause even the reader to exist willingly within the fictional/theatrical world as she becomes the performance. With the consciously prepared performance of her gender, other essentialist categories which male decadent texts rely upon as truths, such as truth/falsehood, good/bad, disappear as stable ideological co-ordinates. To elaborate on this point, Alcott turns to another setting for the art of acting: the *tableaux vivants*.

Both Alcott as author and Jean Muir as actress recognize that in order for a woman to succeed in society, she must become an accomplished actress. In the *Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir echoes this sentiment and elaborates on the consequences of the foundational charade of society which Jean exploits in the *tableaux vivants*:

> Woman plays the part of those secret agents who are left to the firing squad if they get caught, and are loaded with rewards if they succeed; it is for her to shoulder all man's immortality: not the

> prostitute only, but all women who serve as server to the shining, wholesome edifice where respectable people have their abode. When, thereupon, to these women one speaks of dignity, honour, loyalty, of all the lofty masculine virtues, it is not astonishing if they decline to "go along." They laugh in derision particularly when the virtuous males have just reproached them for not being disinterested, for play-acting, for lying. They well know that no other way out is open to them. (578-579)

It is through the acting and performance of the *tableaux vivants* that Jean casts "the indescribable spell of womanhood" (BM 395) to capture the duality of angel in the house and whore which the men desire. Jean's approximation of the women in the *tableaux*--murderess, martyr, damsel-in-distress, and virgin monarch--foregrounds what Judith Butler has labelled the "performativity of gender":

> acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That

> the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute reality. (136)

Jean's choices of women to portray in the *tableaux vivants* demonstrate that "the sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a 'natural sex' or a 'real woman' or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions" (Butler 140). It is not that Jean is, in essence or by nature, vulnerable and good as a woman; rather, she performs the role delineated for her as maiden governess in service to the Coventry family as a means to an end: marriage into the landed family would enable her to avoid the uncertain fate of a fallen, single woman.

The *tableaux vivants* exploit Jean's understanding of the psychological and physical games(man)ship which she uses to manipulate the family. In her masquerade, Jean impersonates several legendary women, including Judith and Queen Elizabeth I, to electrify and seduce her male victims out of "the ennui of another day" (BM 371). The first scene, Holofernes's murder, replays the decadent obsession with the Salome/Judith image of the conquered male and jubilant woman. Jean reappears, dressed in

> barbaric splendor. One hand turned back the embroidered sleeve from the arm which held a scimitar; one slender foot in a scarlet sandal was visible under the white tunic; her purple mantle swept down from snowy shoulders; fillets of gold bound her hair, and jewels shone on neck and arms (BM 393)

Holofernes's demonic, yet icy, nemesis appears as tall, dark, and unrecognizable to the family as the little woman of their house.

> "Who is it?" whispered Lucia, for the face was new to her.
>
> "Jean Muir," answered Coventry, with an absorbed look.
>
> "Impossible! She is small and fair," began Lucia, but a hasty "Hush, let me look" from her cousin silenced her.
>
> Impossible as it seemed, he was right, nevertheless: for Jean Muir it was. She had darkened her skin, painted her eyebrows, disposed some wild black locks over her fair hair, and thrown such an intensity of expression into her eyes that they darkened and dilated till they were as fierce

as any southern eyes that ever flashed (BM 393)

in her intense rebuttal to the male voyeur's objectifying gaze.

Like the later Salomes of Oscar Wilde and Gustave Moreau, as well as the Judith series of Gustav Klimt, Jean is surrounded by orientalised images of the powerful exotic. Her setting consists of

> a tiger skin, in the shadow of a tent. Oriental arms and drapery...an antique silver lamp burned dimly on a table where fruit lay heaped in costly dishes, and wine shone redly. (BM 393)

Championed by the admiration of her audience and comfortable in her setting, Jean becomes the murderess whose

> Hatred, the deepest and bitterest, was written on her sternly beautiful face, courage glowed in her glance, power spoke in the nervous grip of the slender hand that held the weapon, and the indomitable will of the woman was expressed. (BM 393)

Realizing she has sufficiently destabilized the perception of the audience, Jean strikes again with more subtlety.

For her second artistic rendition of woman, Jean's next *tableau vivant* exchanges the costume of the passionate murderess for "the charmingly prim and puritanical dress of a Roundhead damsel" (BM 394) who sacrifices herself in order to secure the life of her lover. This masquerade transforms Jean not merely into a different aesthetic experience, but into a conceptual domain that stresses another set of ethical principles: faithfulness, purity, and love. The illusion captures the elusive and sceptical Gerald; as the lover, he subsumes himself into the romantic lead. Jean further tightens her grasp on his imagination with her image of a damsel-in-distress as the epitome of tragedy, followed in rapid succession by the regal chastity of Queen Elizabeth I whose

> rich dress became her wonderfully, and an air of luxurious indolence changed the meek governess into a charming woman. She leaned on the velvet cushions as if she were used to such support; she played with the jewels which had crowned her as carelessly as if she were born to wear them. (BM 396)

Through innuendo, Jean achieves her goal: the viewers' hypocritical pity, because with a change of costume/

persona, they "know she was wellborn to see her now" (BM 396). So taken with the bejewelled and passionate Jean, Gerald later feels "as if he had suddenly stepped into a romance, yet finding a keen pleasure in the part assigned to him. Coventry threw himself into it with spirit, and heartily did his best to console the poor girl who needed help so much" (BM 399). As the director of his literary and literal fate, Jean's artistic vision controls his inability to differentiate between reality and fiction. Even Gerald's conception of romance is based on a fiction: the object of his affection exists only as a subjective impression in his imagination. Nothing exists outside Jean's controlled theatre of decadent voyeurism. Intellectually the dominating force of the theatrical performance, Jean uses "her fatal power of reading character" (BM 397), both fictional and real, to create an erotic of literariness or intertextuality between *tableaux* and voyeurs which subjugates her willing victims to her final act where she becomes the Lady of the manor.

Alcott's "masterplot [of]...a 'newly found power' of aesthetic imagination" (Showalter 1988: 37) comes to fruition in her full-length decadent novel, *A Modern Mephistopheles*. Although it was written anonymously for

the Roberts Brothers' No Name Series in 1877,[10] one reviewer[11] believed that the unknown author was "of whichever sex, [but] writes in this instance with both the defects and merits of a woman's pen" (Stern 1984: 204), while others thought it obviously the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne[12] (Stern 1984: 203). Rather than being "a fresh and dainty fantasy" (Stern 1984: 205), Alcott claimed that the powerful and dark tale had been "simmering in her brain ever since she read [Goethe's] *Faust* the year before" (Cheney 290). According to Ednah D. Cheney, Alcott felt it was important to follow Goethe's concept "that the Prince of Darkness was a

[10]There seems to be some confusion on the part of critics as to the ancestry of this novel. Two other Alcott texts, "Freak of a Genius" (1866) and "A Modern Mephistopheles; or, The Long Fatal Love Chase" (a manuscript written in 1866, and rejected by Elliott, Thomes & Talbot as too sensational, but recently published in 1995 as *A Long and Fatal Love Chase)* have interesting similarities to *A Modern Mephistopheles* which could bear a future fruitful discussion of the development of the author's decadent themes.

[11]These observations were made by an early critic, Edward R. Burlingame, in his review of the text for *The North American Review*. 125 (September 1877): 316-318 which was reprinted in Stern's *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, 204.

[12]The connection of Alcott's text with Hawthorne reflects her consistent use of intertextuality in her "blood and thunder" tales. Several of her stories make obvious or covert reference to "Rappaccini's Daughter," *The Marble Faun* and *The Scarlet Letter*.

gentleman, and must be represented as belonging to the best society" (290). In *A Modern Mephistopheles*, the prince of darkness is Jasper Helwyze who is, by name, Hell-wise and sterile as stone, and who exists as a portrait of decadence and aristocratic privilege who, consumed by the ennui (*MM 57*) of his physically impotent existence, coaxes a young poet named Felix Canaris into a "psychological quadrilateral"[13] with the promise of literary fame and fortune. Building upon mythic images from her earlier works, including the myths of Pygmalion and Psyche, as well as decadent themes of homoeroticism, art for art's sake, degeneration, exoticism, sterility, theatre and voyeurism, Alcott creates an ancestor to the decadent tradition of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*[14] that exposes the destructive nature of art for art's sake and it's cost to women.

The framing relationship of the narrative is between Jasper and Felix; like the previous relationship in "A

[13]This term was coined by Burlingame in the previously mentioned review, here quoted from *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, page 205.

[14]Once again, there is an interesting possibility for a consideration of the genealogy of Oscar Wilde's text of 1890 in *A Modern Mephistopheles* which this project does not allow for at this time.

Marble Woman" between Germaine and Yorke, the two men have a complicated one that is mediated by a young woman, respectively, Gladys and Cecil. In *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick convincingly theorizes the type of powerful bond which Jasper and Felix share, a bond that is fundamental to patriarchy and patriarchal oppression, but is not necessarily sexual where

> the structure of the continuum of male "homosocial desire" [is] tightly, often causally bound up with...the emerging pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality in an intimate and shifting relation to class; and that *no element of that pattern can be understood outside of its relation to women and the gender system as a whole*. (My italics, 1)

The homosocial continuum of two men is triangulated with the inclusion of a woman who acts as catalyst or bonding agent. Alcott's erotic triangle can be understood through Sedgewick's re-conceptualization of René Girard's assertion that

> in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the

> bonds of "rivalry" and "love," differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent. (Sedgewick 21)

Locked into this covenant with the Mephistophelian Jasper Helwyze, Felix agrees to spend a year at his home in search of fame and fortune.

From the outset, Jasper's "beardless, thin-lipped, sharply cut, and colorless" face that is consumed by "the man's indomitable spirit [which] seemed concentrated, intense and brilliant" with eyes "unless mastered by an art stronger than nature [will be] attracting or repelling with a magnetism few wills could resist" (*MM* 6) contrasts dramatically with the passively statuesque Felix who is "scarcely less beautiful than the Narcissus in the niche behind him" (*MM* 6). Jasper recognizes that "Youth surely *is* the beauty of the devil" (*MM* 8); however, he "bought [his] handsome Alcibiades, his own "Greek slave" (*MM* 24), admittedly for his "own pleasure. It is not every one who can have antique beauty in flesh and blood as well as marble" and he fancies to keep Felix "as the one ornament [his] library lacked before" (*MM* 8). The beautiful boy[15] image culminates in the sensual

description of Felix's "luxuriant locks", "white throat," "large dreamy eyes," and "voluptuous lips" which are barely "redeeming [in] beauty from effeminacy" (*MM* 6) although Jasper does taunt him with the recognition that Felix possesses "all the gifts which win women except wealth and ----" (*MM* 65). In such a significant narrative gap, the inference is that Felix, despite the decadent debauchery which "utterly engrossed [him] as if existence had no higher aim than the most refined and varied pleasure" (*MM* 108), perhaps lacks desire for women, a desire which may, in turn, explain why there is an "almost brutal frankness [which] characterized the intercourse of these men at times; for the tie between them was a peculiar one, and fretted both, though both clung to it with strange tenacity" (*MM* 58). Jasper exploits "one of the strongest passions that rule men,--the spirit of rivalry,--knowing well its power over one so young, vain and sensitive" (*MM* 56) in order to remain the Socratic teacher to his young Alcibiades.

The construction of Felix as the object of Jasper's

[15]For a further discussion, see Martha Vicinus "The Adolescent Boy: *Fin-de-Siècle Femme Fatale*?" in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. 5.1(1994): 90-114.

will, and possibly desire, is conditional to Felix's role as the purveyor of male heterosexuality in the text. Felix plays Bacchus's subjectively pleasing role as Jasper's favourite ornamental art,[16] in the masterful decadent's desire to heighten the sensuality of his existence in the belief that "the more delicate the senses, the more delicate the delight" (*MM* 79) to one of "accustomed elegance so grateful to fastidious tastes" (*MM* 79). In addition, Felix represents the possibilities of male sexuality that are impossible for the "wasted limbs" (*MM* 27) of Jasper since an accident in his thirties makes him invalid. Having suffered from a terrible fall, Jasper is deserted by his then sweetheart, Olivia, who returns to his side only out of pity after the death of her husband. Jasper claims that his "passions are all dead, else life would be a hell, not the purgatory it is" (*MM* 27), but his purchase of Felix allows him to buy the potency of youth that he lacks for his relations with both Gladys and Olivia. Instead, he

[16]There are many instances in the text where Felix continuously looks at himself in mirrors and other surfaces in much the same way that the later Dorian Gray is self-aware of the effect of his beauty upon those people who surround him, particularly men.

admits that

> to study the mysterious mechanism of human nature is a most absorbing pastime, when books weary, and other sources of enjoyment are forbidden...when men and women are the pawns you learn to move at will (*MM* 30)

In fact, this aristocratically privileged and degenerate pastime constitutes his artwork: the manipulation and "taming" (*MM* 24), by male tyranny masquerading as authority, of men and women suit his aesthetic pleasures of exoticism and voyeurism.

The decadent elements of *A Modern Mephistopheles* are not limited only to the Hellenistic construction of Felix as slave/pupil who desires to become the master (*MM* 63); rather, there are many other significant elements of artificiality and orientalism within the text in the form of flowers, decor, exotic gifts and goddesses, sterility and opiates. Often equated with women and sexuality in decadent texts, the details of the flowers in the text are two fold; first, Gladys is consistently equated, both in the rooms of her "hot house life" (*MM* 155) and in the mind of Jasper, with flowers reminiscent of scenes from

Huysmans's *Against Nature* where great pains are taken to assure an artificial representation of the natural. Aside from many references to lilies, weeds, and grasses which range in colour from green to crimson as well as white, the luxurious apartments prepared for her by Jasper are in the colour of the

> deepest crimson [that] glowed everywhere, making her feel as if she stood in the heart of a great rose whose silken petals curtained her round with a color, warmth, and fragrance which would render sleep a "rapture of repose." (*MM* 71)

It is well to remember here that Naomi Schor has concluded in *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics in the Feminine* that "the association of details, femininity and decadence is perhaps the most persistent legacy left to us by Classicism" (22); therefore, it is fitting that "Womanlike, [Gladys] enjoyed every dainty device and sumptuous detail; yet the smile of pleasure was followed by a faint sigh, as if the new magnificence oppressed her" (*MM* 71) with the knowledge that it was meant for manipulative purposes. Second, Jasper's control of Gladys' sexuality is implicit in the constant parallel between her and various flora. While Olivia's "spring

flowers are all gone long ago," she offers Gladys to Jasper, about whom he admits that

> no spring flower could be more delicate than she, gathered by your own hand from the bleak nook where you found her. It is the faint, vernal fragrance of nature, coyly hidden from common eye and touch, which satisfies and soothes senses refined by [the] suffering (*MM* 29)

which makes him smile as he drops the dismembered petals of a rose upon the ground. Later, Jasper admits of Cecil that he "longed to break [the] delicate plant, yet delayed, lest [she] should wither too quickly in his hand" (*MM* 54) from his degenerative impulses towards cruelty.

In each case, the flowers represent Jasper's presumptuous entitlement to the sexuality of Gladys, either to maintain in its pure form only surrounded by the lustful desire of the men, or as a representative for a fertile imagination. As Felix/Jasper's muse, Gladys fuels the "intellectual intoxification" (*MM* 84) which ultimately results ironically in the pro-creation of an incomplete "metrical romance" (*MM* 101), the sterile production of a "purple-covered volume" (*MM* 179) of

inauthentic art born of the Faustian pact which eventually claims in return the life of Felix and Gladys's true creation: their newborn son. In Jasper's desire to create a play in the tradition of Aeschylus and Shakespeare, "one and all were made subject to the strong passions which ruled him; jealousy, ambition, revenge, and love wore their appropriate guise, acted their appropriate parts" (*MM* 180) in the male aesthete's desire to create a "live thing" (*MM* 104) out of a sterile imagination.

The decor of the rooms not only reflect the decadent preoccupation with detail and colour, but are indicative of these personalities and power relations within the household. Excluded from the one room in which Felix works with the warning that, should she enter, she may "fare like Bluebeard's Fatima" (*MM* 76), Gladys spends much of her time at the domestic chores of "brushing up the hearth, brightening the lamps, and putting by the finished books" (*MM* 58). In her inner private chamber, the duality of Gladys's existence is emphasised by the fact that Jasper decides there should be "White everywhere, except the pale green of the softly tinted walls, and the mossy carpet strewn with mimic snow-drops.

A sheaf of lilies in a silver vase stood on the low chimney-piece above the hearth" where Gladys is admonished "to shut out the world, [and secure] the sweet privacy a happy woman loves" (*MM* 71). The construction of the bordello/nunnery exposes the desires of the men rather than the personality of Gladys; however, there is one space in the house that allows her self-reflection--a small, curtained recess where there is "a little woodland nook imprisoned between the glass-door and the deep window beyond" with normally wild ranging "hardy vines" and "sturdy grasses" (*MM* 77) which, since tamed and marginalized, shows her isolation and victimization by Jasper and Felix whose "impious pastime, a dearly purchased fame, [is] built on the broken hearts of women!" (*MM* 30).[17]

The orientalism of certain elements of the text centre around the eastern bazaar items which surround

[17]The use of the crimson-coloured room as well as the nook hideout are possibly another direct result of Alcott's knowledge of and admiration for Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The young Jane suffers from abuse, possibly sexual, in the red-room of her childhood home where she is tyrannized by her cousin John Reid. Jane takes refuge from his cruelty in a window seat/nook where she fantasizes about her escape while she looks out onto the moors and reads a book about exotic birds.

Jasper as he quotes poetry that "suggest[s] a sultan and a slave" (*MM* 89) in parallel to their real situation. It is at this point in the text that Gladys "[throws] off the gauzy veil" (*MM* 89) and refuses a bracelet of the Nine Muses, including Urania and Erato, because she declares "It is too heavy. I am not made to wear handcuffs of any sort, you see: they will not stay on, so it is of no use to try" (*MM* 90). Further refusing "a collection of Hindoo gods and goddesses, in ebony or ivory: some hideous, some lovely, all carved with wonderful delicacy" which includes Vishnu, Brahma, Kreeshna, Varoon, Siva and Kama, Gladys "will have no idol" (*MM* 91), including Felix and Jasper, and refuses to be passive in her role as muse. At this moment, Jasper realizes that Gladys has gained the upper hand and stands upon the threshold of individuality.

In order to regain control, he offers Gladys "half a dozen white comfits" (*MM* 127) that contain "Hasheesh" for her nerves, and exploitatively suggests that, along with Olivia, they have an evening of "Arabian Nights entertainment"(*MM* 131) of *tableaux vivants*. Once again, Alcott uses the art of acting and intertextuality to

illuminate the fledgling power of Gladys as she begins to refuse the passive role of object. In the *tableaux*, Gladys's own will replaces her belief in Felix and Jasper with the dread of being controlled. She realizes that she is at the command of the men and that the decadence of their lifestyle has fashioned her into art, not merely in order to control her, but to shape her very being: to create her.

In yet another subversive usurpation of the literary texts of male authors, Alcott has Gladys enact four *tableaux vivants* taken from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* which express the roles which women might take within society. The first of the *tableaux* finds Gladys as Enid who suffers at the hand of her husband, Geraint's, tyranny much in the same way that Gladys has suffered. In the next, most important tableau, Gladys is ravishing as Vivien, "clad in a great mantle of some Indian fabric...Shoulders and arms showed rosy white under the veil of hair which swept to her knee" (*MM* 136) in the manner of a Pre-Raphaelite painting while she sings to Olivia's Merlin. Jasper misinterprets Gladys' shameless and impassioned inspiration as a tribute to the male viewers/voyeurs who believe that

"these women will work wonders, they are acting to the men they love" (*MM* 137), oblivious to the fact that Gladys acts out of the truth of her own nature, released from the "self-restraint" (*MM* 137) of her daily existence. As she prepares for the final performance, Felix admits to Jasper that "the woman suits me better than the angel" (*MM* 137) while "Olivia wondered at her unsuspected power, and felt a little envious of her enchanting gift" (*MM* 140).[18] For her finale, she appears as the lily maid, Elaine of Astolat/Lady of Shalott, who sings a lament for her lost Lancelot; the viewers are unable to tell "whether it was acting or insanity" (*MM* 131) just before Gladys collapses into her drug-induced dreams. Captivated by her performance,

> Helwyze did an evil thing,--a thing few men could or would have done. He deliberately violated the sanctity of a human soul, robbing it alike of its

[18]Instead of being jealous, there are indications in *A Modern Mephistopheles*, Egerton's *Keynotes* and *Discords*, as well as in D'Arcy's *Monochromes* and *Modern Instances*, of the need for a community of women to combat patriarchy. Once Gladys becomes pregnant, Olivia is no longer her enemy in the quest to be muse to the male artist; instead, the two women bond in a mother-daughter relationship that has a regenerating influence on both women and incites them to disrupt the hold which the male decadents have over them.

> most secret and most precious thoughts. Hasheesh had lulled the senses which guarded the treasure, now the magnetism of a potent will forced the reluctant lips to give up the key. (*MM* 146)

The figurative, if not literal, rape of Gladys while her "very childishness should have pleaded for her" is carried out by the

> power upon the accomplishment of the purpose to which he bent his will. He called it psychological curiosity; for not even to himself did he dare confess the true meaning of the impulse which drove him to this act, and dearly did he pay for it. (*MM* 146)

Jasper's cruelty leaves Gladys as the aestheticised "pale effigy of the woman" (*MM* 146), both theatrically, and later realistically, who embodies the destruction of women by the Mephistophelian male artist who is then left to continue to "work in clay, as caprice inspired or circumstance suggested; forgetting that life's stream of mixed and molten metals would flow over his faulty models, fixing unalterably both beauty and blemish" (*MM* 204).

Alcott's narratives not only expose the

hypocritical, removed pose of the decadent male artist, but they suggest that there is a way for women to escape the tyranny of the male decadent's search for his muse; both the refusal of the role of passive muse and the usurpation of the position of artist with the potential power of self-creation become powerful symbols of regeneration further explored in the *femmes-de-siècle*--George Egerton and Ella D'Arcy.

Chapter Four

Femmes de Siècle: "George Egerton"[1] and Ella D'Arcy[2]

> Femininity in this sense is on the same side as madness. It is because madness secretly prevails that it must be normalized...It is because femininity secretly prevails that it must be recycled and normalized (in sexual liberation in particular).
>
> --Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* 17

In the years following Louisa May Alcott's retreat from decadent women to little women, a new type of fiction emerged in Ireland and England which male critics sought to normalize, then marginalize, the mad fiction of suffragette minds. Far from being the trivialities of an

[1]Pseudonym adopted by Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright throughout her writing career. I have speculated elsewhere in an article, "Trivialized Female Idealism or Valourized Male Realism: The Importance of Being 'George'," that the continuous use of the male pseudonym "George" after its scandalous conception by "George Sand" may trace a lineage of avant-garde female authors who pay homage to her writing, philosophy and reputation through its continued use.

[2]D'Arcy's full name was Constance Eleanor Mary Byrne D'Arcy, but she also wrote stories for the London periodical, *Argosy*, under the male pseudonym of "Gilbert H. Page."

unbalanced mind, the New Woman fiction, much of which appeared in the infamous periodical *The Yellow Book* and in John Lane's equally notorious *Keynotes* series, became persistently identified with the decadent male artist because "the ambitions of both [presented] a profound threat to established culture" (Dowling 434-435). The New Women writers themselves are generally considered to fall into two main camps. First, there is the "purity school" which includes such authors as Sarah Grand, Iota and Grant Allen, who desired to maintain the traditional, middle-class Victorian ideal of femininity while approaching equality, and to emphasize the belief that the most important principle for the woman was purity. The purity school writers believe that purity cannot be enforced; rather, it has to be chosen by well-informed young women. For this reason, such issues as venereal disease, adultery and seduction appeared in their fiction for the instruction and education of young women. Second, there is the "neurotic" school which professes a more radical feminism that considers the attainment of sexual freedom to be the route to the attainment of equality. Traditionally seen as opposites, the decadent male and the New Woman are unified in the nefarious purpose of several apocalyptic visions of culture. There is a

blurred boundary between the nihilism of the male decadent and the neurotic desire of the New Woman for independance from social conventions; however, the New Woman Sphinx--Oscar Wilde and Richard Le Gallienne's name for writers such as George Egerton, "Vernon Lee" and Ada Leverson--represents as much of a threat to the decadent male with her condemnation of those male writers' destructive impulses towards women.

These New Women writers are, in a very strong sense, decadent themselves as they attempt to disrupt the conventional imaginative dialectics of the late-Victorian age. Their criticism, which takes the form of fiction, becomes a seductive art in itself where fantasy is interrupted with interpretive dialogue, and where critical discussion is entwined with seductive description. The dialectics of Egerton and D'Arcy's narratives include a deliberative interaction between private brooding and public dialogue; this interaction creates a type of female decadent aesthetic or sublime when combined with linguistically stylized descriptions of the beautiful and the psychological which also pervade their texts. This intervention into gender politics, through the exercise of an hermeneutic of suspicion, creates their decadent aesthetic.

Once again, Hugh Stutfield's article, "Tommyrotics," warns that "Society['s]...most dangerous and subtle foes are beyond question 'neurotics' and hysteri[cs] in their manifold forms" (833). He claims that texts such as George Egerton's *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords*(1894), and Ella D'Arcy's *Monochromes* (1895) and *Modern Instances* (1898) are written by a genealogy of women who are the "offspring of hysteria" who write repulsive fiction because "To be a woman is to be mad,... [but even worse], the woman of the new Ibsenite [neurotic] school is not only mad herself, but she does her best to drive those around her crazed" (Stutfield 1895: 835). Stutfield believes that these "neurotic" writers "are simply sick... degenerates to be shunned like any other manifestations of disease" (Stutfield 1895: 836) because they need sedatives rather than mental excitants to feed their psychoses. He dismisses the New Women's unconventional views and fictional techniques as forms of degenerate corruption and argues against their political agenda because they

> are wrong when they turn women away from the duties of their sex and when they turn their heads with illusory emancipatory ideas, which are unrealizable and absurd. Let woman remain what Nature has made

> her: an ideal woman, the companion and lover of a man, the mistress of the home... . (Stutfield 1895: 117)

In other words, let woman be content with the role assigned to her as man's designated other.

Against Stutfield, I would argue that these women are neither psychologically classic hysterics or neurotics, nor is their fiction strictly limited to the realm of the New Woman because these women are accutely aware of the fact that "the sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a 'natural sex' or a 'real woman' or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions" (Butler 140) which may be antithetical to their cause. The fictions of Egerton[3] and D'Arcy are threatening to patriarchal culture because they do not replicate acceptable nineteenth-century stereotypes of a deviant woman, a madwoman in an attic, a fallen Magdalen or an Ophelian passive and victimized woman. Instead, Egerton and D'Arcy create actively erotic female characters who challenge existing notions of idealized

[3]Egerton's texts were greeted by the 1890s media as symptomatic of "the Beerbohmic plague" of literature (from the *Bookbuyer* XVIII: 184 as quoted in Katherine Mix's *A Study in Yellow: The Yellow Book and Its Contributors*. Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 1960. 172.

woman as an ahistorical, non-subjective "other" who exists only to define the masculine in culture; their central recognition is that a subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules (Butler 145).

To contextualize further these women writers, it is important to remember the previous discussion's of woman's categorization in the nineteenth century. Positioned outside of history proper, woman is identified instead with the immediacy and intimacy of social life. Man is a generic or universal category that is constituted through violently hierarchical differences; the main difference is that woman must be radically other to history and to men. The later nineteenth century is the time of the Woman Question, the time of Hegelian dialectics, and the progress of history in conflict with woman labelled as inferior. Men are constituted as historical subjects and find man in history by locating woman Otherwise.

The spectacular inflation of women's ideal value assumed to be endowed by nature and the consequent repression of her subjective reality is inextricably a

part of the nineteenth-century investment in history. The tremendous effort to understand women, to manage them, to find out what they want--the ceaseless asking of the Woman Question--occurs at the expense of the real woman as the price of discovering the truth of man in the far reaches of history. For a Victorian Englishman, historical consciousness is a mode of self-consciousness, an awareness of the self by means of the other. If this self-consciousness is no innocent achievement, and if middle class Victorian men become aware of themselves by means of the other, then otherness is conceived of as a means to an end. The otherness of Victorian history must be read as a problem, not an answer, a process in which differences are produced only to reflect the truths of certain men, a process which constructs an imaginary unity of English/ British men which is then projected as an image of universal white men and then mankind; this entire process entails the radical exclusion of women from the historical construction of subjectivity. To look at Victorian writing without asking how it produces or disrupts these images would be to necessarily reflect, beyond question, its truths.

In *Writing a Woman's Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun believes that

> Women have long searched, and continue to search, for an identity "other" than their own. Caught in the conventions of their sex, they have sought an escape from gender. A woman author who was not content to expound the titillations of romance, or to live out Freud's family romance, had two means of escape. One was to hide her identity as an author within the shelter of anonymity, the safety of secrecy, to write while protecting the quotidian self leading her appropriate life. The other was to create in her writings women characters, and sometimes male characters, who might openly enact the dangerous adventures of a woman's life, unconstrained by female propriety. (111-112)

For these same reasons, George Egerton and Ella D'Arcy categorically refuse to allow their writing to reflect the limitations of gender dialectics "which condition the problematics of identity that it seeks to solve" (Butler 144). Their writing is critical of the use of such dialectics by male decadent authors and theorist whose fantasies of aestheticism and femininity are, as Rita Felski points out, "defined and valorized in opposition to the naiveté of feminist struggles for social change; accused of either vulgar essentialism or phallic

identification, real women are, it appears, incapable of 'becoming woman'" (Felski 113) while

> the aesthete's performance of femininity is depicted as authentically modern precisely because of its self-conscious transcendence of the constraints of corporeality and natural sexual identity within which woman remains imprisoned (Felski 112)

both in image and in society.

Egerton questions what exactly is the natural and what are the implications of woman's corporeal being as she demystifies the ideology and/or epistemology of the representation of woman in male-authored decadence. Egerton's decadent style was considered to be as disarming as her material because it was episodic, full of narrative gaps and it showed an almost complete lack of interest in causal relations relying instead upon psychological impressions and details. Egerton lays the groundwork for the project of a decadent woman with a frank exploration of woman's role in society and her right to a self-defined sexuality. Rather than assuming that art imitates reality and represents something both external and prior to the work of fiction, Egerton prominently figures female desire in her fiction. As an early modernist, Egerton's narrators focalize through her

female characters. This creates psychological immediacy which allows her to explore the decadent obsession with the distinctions between the ideal and the real.

Egerton's fiction explodes the polarization of the male decadent and the New Woman by showing that

> [either] women are subsumed into supposedly general and objective norms derived from male experience, or they are represented as other, as the polar opposite of man. In both cases, they are judged by *male norms masquerading as universal values.* There thus appears to be no standpoint which would allow woman to be valued in and for herself. Almost all discussions about women represent only what they are in their real, ideal, or value relationship to men. No one asks what they are for themselves...the conclusion is drawn that for herself she is *nothing.* (My italics, Felski 44)

In furtherance of debunking this social myth, Egerton disrupts the decadent projection of women's sexuality as merely evil or hysteric, positing instead a politicized, detailed female sexuality with the precision of a decadent. Her fiction calls for a resistance to and subversion of the imposition of the ideal image upon real women because both the projection and the results are

degrading and debilitating to a woman's individuality. The psychological immediacy which Egerton creates in her texts assists her confrontation of Victorian conventions which deny women artistic and sexual means of self-expression. She methodically and systematically dismantles the main mythologies which construct woman: the definition of marriage as happy closure, the regulation of active sexuality as moral or decadent only in men, and the construction of woman through her own enforced ignorance.

"An Empty Frame"[4] deals with a short moment in a woman's life where she stands gazing intently at an empty picture frame while she contemplates her husband's ongoing and multiple infidelities which she is expected to forgive and forget. She thinks of an earlier time and of another man who desired her as an equal, wanted a life-long relationship based on mutual respect, but who refused to subsume her identity in a conventional marriage. Her thoughts range from anger to regret in a humourous but revealing reversal of a social cliché; this woman knows that "with a great man [she] might have

[4]References to George Egerton's short fiction will be taken from *Keynotes* or *Discords* and will be denoted by the narrative title.

made a great woman" (EF K 122) if she had only had the courage to refuse to conform to convention and had filled the empty frame with the artwork of her own life. Under her artistic gaze, the "plain white space becomes alive to her" (EF K 117) but has never been given a chance to express herself as an individual. Her current situation defines her as a "little woman" (EF K 119)[5] who is controlled by her husband, whereas an artistic/sexual liaison with a more progressive man would have possibly enabled her to fulfil her potential and define her own identity.

Once Egerton has defined her perceptions of these restrictions endured in the institution of marriage by women, she reveals the degrading effects of male sexual predation on women and the resulting power dynamics in *Discords*' "Virgin Soil," a story which also challenges the arrogant morality of the ideal. In this story, Flo is a malleable seventeen year old who has just married Philip, a man with grey hair whom she does not love. While Philip waits to embark on their honeymoon, Flo cries upstairs in her mother's arms and asks "What is it that I do not know, mother? What is it?...There is

[5]There are several uses of the phrase "little woman" in the stories of Egerton where men demean their wives with its use.

something more--I have felt it all these last weeks in your and the others' looks--in his, in the very atmosphere--but why have you not told me before"(VS D 146). Her mother denies her empathy and chastises her with the voice of society:

> "You are married now, darling, and you must obey...your husband in all things--there are things you should know--but marriage is a serious thing, a sacred thing--you must believe what your husband tells you is right--let him guide you." (VS D 146)

Treated like the girl-child in "Little Red Riding Hood," Flo encounters Egerton's revision of the wolf who "comes for her; his hot breath smells of champagne, and it strikes her that his eyes are fearfully big and bright, and he offers her his arm with such a curious amused proprietary air that the girl shivers as she lays her hand in it"(VS D 147-8). Flo's marriage is quickly filled with "bitter disillusion" (VS D 149) by a bestial husband who demonstrates the hypocrisy of any politically detached understanding of male sexuality:

> [Men] finesse and flatter and wheedle and coax, but truth there is none. I couldn't do that you see, and so I went to the wall. I don't blame them; it must be so, as long as marriage is based on such unequal

> terms, as long as man demands from a wife as a right, what he must sue from a mistress as a favour; until marriage becomes for many women a legal prostitution, a nightly degradation, a hateful yoke under which they age, mere bearers of children conceived in a sense of duty, not love...they submit to [sex] with distaste instead of a favour granted to a husband who must become a new lover to obtain it. (VS D 155)

Further, with an exultant cry "like the fancied echo of the laughter of hell," she claims that

> [A man] is responsible for his own sins, we [as women], are not bound to dry nurse his morality...No wife is bound to set aside the demands of her individual soul for the sake of imbecile obedience. (VS D 155)

Flo leaves to claim her own life outside of the role dictated to her by society and her husband that has dehumanized and repressed her intellect as well as her sexuality; at the same time, Egerton has exposed the fraudulence of such social understandings of the desires of the respective sexes.

Egerton makes a strong case for woman's right to sexual experimentation and expression, rather than the

enforcement, through women's complicity, of patriarchal conventions which subsume woman as a passive function of her body rather than as an active, intellectual, desiring sexual entity. Again, through an indictment of Flo's mother, Egerton condemns society:

> it is your fault, because you reared me a fool, an idiot, ignorant of everything I ought to have known, everything that concerned me and the life I was bound to lead as a wife; my physical needs, my coming passion, the very meaning of my sex, my wifehood and motherhood to follow. You gave me not one weapon in my hand to defend myself against the possible attacks of man at his worst. You sent me out to fight the biggest battle of a woman's life ...[with only] maiden purity as a shield (VS D 157)

to wear in the battle of the sexes.

Egerton's stories suggest that women must create an educated and compassionate community of women in order to combat the repression imposed on them by society. In another story with similar implications, "A Psychological Moment," Egerton declares that women have been alienated from each other by socially imposed conventions, such as religion, to the point where "the subdued soul of [a] still young woman has disciplined [her] thoughts and

feelings and soul and body into a machine" (D 13) because society does not "encourage independence in women; [patriarchy believes that] when they lose this hold on [women] they'll lose their hold on humanity" (PM D 57). Egerton exposes the extent to which Victorian women have internalized the conventional ideal of womanhood and demonstrates by example why woman's complicity in this form of patriarchal oppression must end.

Egerton believes that women are "prey to every man who thinks she has given him a right to her person" (PM D 61); for this reason, woman must redefine herself without "All the systems of philosophy or treatises of moral science, all the religious codes devised by the imagination of men [that] will not save [her]" (PM D 64). One such step is to explore woman's sexuality without the limitations of male-defined morality. It is crucial to understanding Egerton's fiction that each pivotal restraint that is placed upon woman by society is exposed before she is able to advance and subvert the role of woman's sexuality to recreate a decadent woman. Perhaps not as blatent as the sexual characters of Rachilde, Egerton's critics understood that her writing and her characters posed a threat to Victorian proper culture:

The physiological excursions of our writers of

> neuropathic fiction are usually confined to one field--that of sex. Their chief delight seems to be in making their characters discuss matters which would not have been tolerated in the novels of a decade ago. Emancipated woman in particular loves to show her independence by dealing freely with the relations of the sexes. Hence all the prating of passion, animalism, "the natural workings of sex," and so forth, with which we are nauseated. Most of the characters in these books seem to be erotomaniacs. (Stutfield 1895: 836)

While not necessarily erotomaniacs or nymphomaniacs, Egerton's text do, in fact, use sex to expose the hypocrisy of men and resist the construction of woman as passionless to create a transitional picture of woman. Egerton's fledgling female decadent may not obviously be sexually dominant or malicious, but her active portrayals of these women's rejection of society's normalizing processes make her women perverse in their desire to create themselves as significant moral agents.

"A Shadow's Slant" argues her belief in the need of internal resistance to a life of possession and objectification. Exposing socially accepted dialectics, the husband in this story considers his wife as his

property, but he realizes there is something in her that he cannot possess:

> You wait on me, no slave better, and yet--I can't get at you, near you; that little soul of yours is as free as if I hadn't bought you, as if I didn't own you, as if you were not my chattel, my thing to do what I please with; do you hear...to degrade, to--treat as I please...your spirit is out of my grasp. (SS D 146)

This woman's stoicism is her only resistance to her captivity; Egerton calls the bluff of a detached male and exposes his desire as equal to "an animal with strong passions, and [who] avails himself of the latitude permitted him by the laws of society" (VS 156). It is these social laws, both explicit and implicit, that Egerton confronts and fights to change in her fiction. Once Egerton has deconstructed the claim that men are purely cerebral, she reconstructs the sexuality of woman as not merely physical, but also including a cerebral understanding of woman's erotic nature.

To define women as desiring subjects, not merely as objects of man's pleasure leads George Egerton to construct many of her heroines as forthright, sensual women who freely express their sexual natures. It is her

female characters' expression of their personal sexuality which causes them to be classified, by some of her male characters (and by literary critics) as neurotic rather than as true, pleasure-seeking decadents. Granted, Egerton's heroines have often internalized societal conventions to the point that they break into hysterical laughter or manifest hysterical/ neurotic symptoms when they are forced to repress their desire in order to maintain their masks/masquerades. For example, Mrs Grey is only able to discuss her sexual desire with shame:

> I was lonely and wretched, and I don't know what madness possessed me--you can't understand. One just gets insane, and lets oneself be carried away. I think the devil gets hold of one. I tried to attract him; there was a kind of excitement in it...there was a kind of fascination in the danger... I had no control over myself, something used to possess me; it is always like that, one stifles the memory of the first with the excitement of the second. (PM D 102-104)

While Egerton does not make it immediately possible for Mrs. Grey to overcome her shame, she exposes the inadequacy of the language to discuss her physical desires and emotional needs as limited to the claim of

temporary insanity.

Martha Vicinus argues that "[u]nlike other fin de siècle writers...Egerton was not influenced by French Decadence" (Vicinus 1983: xii); however, the precision of Egerton's detailed consideration of woman's sexual desire creates the possibility of a politicized female decadent sexuality. Egerton's consideration of woman's potent(ial) sexuality exposes the fact that men are frightened by what a decadent woman represents because

> when a Strindberg or a Nietzsche[6] arises and peers into the recesses of her nature and dissects her ruthlessly, the men shriek out louder than the women, because the truth is at all times unpalatable, and the gods they have set up are dear to them (CL K 23)

in the social "system that means war, and always war, because it is a struggle between instinctive truths and cultivated lies" ("Spring Has Come" K 41).

Egerton celebrates the potential of female eroticism as a way to disrupt this system by displaying openly and without male mediation--thereby proving--the existence of

[6]According to Terence De Vere White, editor of the correspondence of George Egerton in his *A Leaf from The Yellow Book*, this is the first reference to Nietzsche in English (18).

her own and her female characters' individual and subjective sexuality through the minutae of the moment. Egerton's "A Cross Line" is a rare female re-visioning of the Salomé story of Moreau, Huysmans and Wilde (and later Strauss),[7] not to forget Mallarmé, Laforgue, Klimt and Beardsley.[8] The most notorious instance of this erotomania in the story takes place in the unnamed female protagonist's fantasy where

> Her thoughts shape themselves into a wild song...an uncouth rhythmical jingle with a feverish beat...to the untamed spirit which dwells in her. Then she fancies she is on the stage of an ancient theatre out in the open air, with hundreds of faces upturned towards her. Her arms are clasped by jewelled snakes and one with quivering diamond fangs coils round her hips.... She bounds forward and dances, bends her lissom waist, and curves her slender arms, and gives to the soul of each man what he craves, be it good or evil. And she can feel now, lying here in the

[7]Oscar Wilde was a friend of George Egerton; interestingly, this may hold suggestive possibilities for the above depiction of the Salome legend.

[8]This story, part of the lead monograph of John Lane's Keynote Series which, in addition to being illustrated by Beardsley, would also publish Beardsley's infamous illustrated version of Oscar Wilde's translated *Salomé*.

> shade of Irish hills...the grand intoxicating power of swaying all these human souls to wonder and applause.... She can see herself...sway voluptuously to the wild music that rises, now slow, now fast, now deliriously wild, seductive, intoxicating.... She can feel the answering shiver of feeling that quivers up to her from the dense audience, spellbound by the motion of her glancing feet, and she flies swifter and swifter, and lighter and lighter.... One quivering, gleaming, daring bound and she stands with outstretched arms and passion filled eyes, poised on one slender foot, asking a supreme note to finish her dream of motion. And the men rise to a man and answer her. (CL K 15)

This passage does not simply reinscribe an essentialistic definition of female sexual nature. Egerton endorses female eroticism and ambition against the naturalistic imperative. In the culture that the protagonist dreams about, she would be able to take pleasure in both her erotic fantasy and her fantasy of success as an artist in a public forum. Significantly, Egerton's protagonist fantasizes about her life in a different, orientalized and exotic cultural context; thus, the protagonist crosses several lines in her dream-vision moving from

Apollonian culture into Dionysian nature and art. Egerton moves outside the inscribed circle that middle-class culture draws around correct female behaviour: eroticism and ambition are co-mingled in this dream in a way that the cultural ideology of female passionlessness would not allow. This scene of assertive female sexuality makes it apparent that the ideal is defined by culture as the place where its most cherished ideas and ideals of woman as passive object can be kept safe from history. Ideal womanhood becomes culture's label for the repression it wants to make inaccessible to social change. This unnamed Salome defies the Victorian ideology of sexual passionlessness by describing sexuality as the core or centre of human personality, and by rejecting the dichotomization of mind/body, reason/passion and St. John/Salomé to establish the body and desire as a determinant of a decadent female mind and subjectivity.

Egerton's demythologization or revisioning of the possibilities of the Salome as the decadents' "obsessive icon of female sexuality" (Showalter 1990: 149) unveils the male or patriarchal bias in previous decadent depictions, an assault upon male sensibility that did not go unnoticed by literary critics. In March of 1894, "SHE-NOTES" by "Borgia Smudgiton" appeared in *Punch; or the*

London Charivari which directly links Egerton to the decadent tradition, both in style and in content. The parody acknowledges her ornate style and is illustrated, à la Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, by an Aubrey Beardsley-esque "Mortarthurio Whiskersley," both of which pay homage to her decadent affinities.[9] In Egerton's text, Salome's hunger for the Baptist's head is thus proved to be a mere pretext for the need to find the source, in woman's insatiable and demonic sexuality, of all the wrongs and rejections men may perceive are visited upon them by the social milieu of the contextualizing culture. Salome, as *femme fatale*, had become their favourite scapegoat, the creature whose death might permit them to drive woman from them in the final climax of their search to transcend the flesh and approach the pure mysticism of the male decadent project. The empowered woman of the vision disrupts archaic truths about woman as the natural against which the male subject defines himself. She argues that Victorian man "has fashioned a model on imaginary lines" (CL K 22) of self-preservatory devotion to the female ideal which shields him from a real woman's possibilities. The unnamed dancer notes that, if men

[9]See Appendix A for a complete version of this parody.

were observant, they would see that the "[s]tray words, half confidences, glimpses through soul-chinks of suppressed fires, actual outbreaks, domestic catastrophes" hint at the "untamed primitive savage temperment that lurks in the mildest, best woman" (CL K 22) which may potentially lead to subversive, sadistic or perverse desire.

Egerton fastidiously presents an alternative image of a decadent woman in her stories with characters such as Mrs. Grey who not only challenges the Victorian ideals of feminine conduct, but who is also desired by men because

> the pout of the wine-red lips, the soft receding chin, and the strange indefinable expression that lurks about them rather fits a priestess of passion...her forehead is a child-girl's; her mouth a courtesan's of forty. (GU D 91)

Through this woman who is full of PreRaphelite eroticism and blatent desire, Egerton implores men to "see the real woman" (GU D 101); further, she calls for a complete disruption of the Victorian dialectics and convention because

> men have manufactured an artificial [and gendered] morality; made sins of things that were clean in

> themselves as the pairing of birds on the wing; crushed nature, robbed it of its beauty and meaning, and established a system that means war, and always war, because it is a struggle between instinctive truths and cultivated lies...In one word, the untrue feminine is of man's making (CL K 49-50)

a creation that must be undone by women in the arts.

Egerton's female protagonists possess a decadent and "morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclination, temper, habits, moral dispositions and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect, or knowing faculties, and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucination" (Hogarth 590). I would argue that Egerton was initially categorized as perverse and neurotic, rather than decadent, in order to attempt to marginalize her and minimalize her potential societal impact because to label her as decadent would present even more of a disruptive threat to the definition of Victorian ideal womanhood. The problem is, it is a resistant and historically situated masculine Victorian world-view that decides what is rational or objective, and delusional or decadent. This labelling of "neurotic" is not the same as what Stutfield sees as neurotic psychoses; in fact,

Freud himself claimed that "Neurotic impulses were due to nonpsychological causes and are evident when sexuality is repressed" (Freud 4). Egerton's progressive ideas of a woman combine the explosive chaos of her potentially decadent sexuality with a thinking, active subject who constitutes herself historically and contextually. By virtue of the nature of the society that defined her, Egerton was a neurotic, a decadent and a New Woman because, as one of her characters says, she believed that "Deep through ages of convention, [woman's] primeval trait of [eternal wildness] burns, an untameable quantity that may be concealed but is never eradicated by culture [because it is] the keynote of woman's strength" (CL K 22) and the key to her redefinition.

Surrounded by the decadence of the periodical *The Yellow Book*, D'Arcy's stories not only reflect decadent preoccupations--they move beyond their restraints to further a portrait of female decadence. Ella D'Arcy's two later volumes[10] which appeared in John Lane's *Keynotes*

[10]D'Arcy was well known to be the Sub-Editor of the periodical; as well, she was a figure of literary curiosity and desire for her various liaisons with John Lane, Henry Harland, Arnold bennett, Netta Syrett, Chrlotte Mew and Richard Aldington. All of the stories found in *Modern Instances* were, in fact, first published in the *Yellow Book*.

series, *Monochromes* and *Modern Instances,* expand upon the female decadent thematics found in Egerton's work to such an extent that Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV begins his brief biographical discussion of her with the provocative title, "Ella D'Arcy, First Lady of the Decadents."[11] D'Arcy was also profoundly concerned with the discrepancy between the woman and the ideal which male-authored decadence and society dictates for her. Real women, she suggests, have flaws, needs, and desires which are not acknowledged in the scope of male fantasies or idealized images. This aestheticized woman necessarily restricts women's actions and choices by making the women themselves subordinate to an imposed ideal. In particular, the conflict created by the decadent male artist's need for a muse and a real woman's resistance to this role creates the struggle of wills in D'Arcy's stories.

The destruction of the female in the wake of man's desire to create art for its own sake is detailed in "The

[11]Upon my discovery of Fisher's label for D'Arcy in his article in *The University of Mississippi Studies in English* (1992): 238-249, I was disappointed to find that there is not an in depth discussion of the implication of D'Arcy's work for decadence; rather, its project is two-fold: it laments the lack of biographical data on the Anglo-Irish author, and advocates a need for D'Arcy's rehabilitation in the history of British fiction.

Elegie," notably the first story in D'Arcy's first collection, *Monochromes*, but originally published in *The Yellow Book* in April of 1895. An unnamed, voyeuristic male narrator tells the story of a young musician, Emil Schoenemann, and his torturous courtship of Marie von Dittenheim. When Emil returns to his native village of Klettendorf-am-Rhein to relax after successfully studying music in Leipsic, he is asked to give piano lessons to the Contesse Marie. He arrives at her home and begins to play. Schoenemann knows he is watched by the young girl, and upon completing his song,

> He looked at her, not with surprise, but with interest that passed into a passionate pleasure. In a flash of light, he caught a resemblance between her and the ideal woman, he had vainly sought since boyhood. (E M 13)

Marie is set immediately upon a pedestal as the "ideal woman" to whom "[Schoenemann] devoted himself, body and soul, to...worship" (E M 13). She falls deeply in love with Emil, and initially, he reacts as a young lover and asks the Graf for Marie's hand in marriage. The Graf rejects Schoenemann's rashly romantic proposal. Instead, a Mephistophilean pact is made between the two men: Marie is to be given in marriage to Schoenemann if he

returns after seven years to claim her when he is professionally successful. In this homosocial continuum, Marie is the idealized commodity of exchange in what Luce Irigaray calls society's "ho(m)mosexual monopoly" where the "law that orders [nineteenth-century] society is the exclusive valorization of men's needs, desires, of exchanges among men" (Irigaray 1985: 171) without consideration of its effect on woman. Here, Marie has no control: her youth, her sex, and her social position all serve to restrict her, to strip her of choices.

The Graf exemplifies the egoism and voyeurism of the detached male decadent who

> gave himself up to a sense of dispassionate entertainment. He was a student of human nature, and constantly deplored the fact that conformity and mental flabbiness rendered so few humans profitable studies. (E M 25),

a position reminiscent of Goethe's Mephistopheles and Alcott's Jasper Helwyze. Emil's idealization of Marie is more complex. First, he believes she can become his muse because "[e]very impression received through the senses became music when it reached [his] young man's brain" (E M 7) in his quest for artistic perfection. The impressions vary between love, worship, and most

importantly, sadism, but Emil idealizes Marie as the focal point for his artistic genius. Marie is no longer real, only an abstract concept out of which he can create his music. Second, the idealization of Marie dehumanizes her because Schoenemann "had long ago recognised [Marie] as unessential to his scheme of life" (E M 37) except as his muse because

> his passion for her had been but transitory, yet how beautiful while it lasted. She would always retain a certain interest for him in having been the passive object, which had awakened those heavenly feelings....But he had long seen clearly that it was the light of his own genius which had transfigured her, and that he had fallen at the feet of an idol of his own creation. (E M 49)

Marie's importance to Schoenemann has little to do with who she is but much to do with what she is: Marie is the mirror of Virginia Woolf and Dorian Gray who reflects back the image of the male to reaffirm his narcissistic superiority as an artist.

"The Elegie" further confronts the ultimate destruction of woman by the decadent male. First, Marie is an unwilling participant in the terms of the Faustian agreement. Marie's desire is denied by her father who,

with decadent voyeurism, sees the "whole of life is only a play...and even [his] own daughter is but one of the players" (E M 31) under his manipulative gaze. Marie's sexual desire is no longer a matter of personal choice; rather, her sexuality is constrained, and essentially prostituted, by her father. D'Arcy rejects this formerly acceptable attitude of woman's feelings as insignificant with her description of Marie's sweeping declaration that "[she] would die sooner" (E M 31) than forget her lover. The resistance to the imposition of her father's wishes demonstrates Marie's desire to maintain some small degree of control over her own emotions. As well, the Graefin reflects D'Arcy's sceptical feelings towards the male attitude towards females as expendable pawns; admonishing the Graf that he "would not mind what shameful part she took, so long as [he] from [his] box could see and hear comfortably all that was done and said" (E M 31). The Graefin, voicing D'Arcy's concerns, declares he is "criminal" (E M 31) in his attitude to his daughter's life and the shame that would be incurred by her if she is forced to adhere to the terms of the agreement which subordinates women's desires to the will of such Faustian men in practices which both degrade and humiliate women.

Later, Schoenemann is given the opportunity to

experience the "intellectual brilliancy of Paris" (E M 33), his freedom and his genius while Marie is held in stasis. Schoenemann is encouraged by the Graf to enjoy his freedom because "[Marie] has reached the highest point of her [artistic] development. She will never be much other than what she now is. But you have still a long way to go" (E M 29). Marie is paralyzed by her father into a static ideal who is incapable of intellectual or artistic advancement during Schoenemann's seven year absence. Woman is given no room for growth or change. In addition, the sexual double standard which is reflected in D'Arcy's story is undermined by the results of the bargain; upon his exploitive return to claim his lover, Schoenemann finds Marie beatified and aestheticized[12] on her funeral bier. The ideal woman in "The Elegie" who is "holy as an angel, and exquisite as a Grecian statue," whose throat is "like marble, as white, columnar, as softly rounded" (E M 14) ends up as Schoenemann's fetishistic preoccupation.

In D'Arcy's stories such as "The Elegie," "The Pleasure Pilgrim," "Irremediable," "A Marriage," and "An

[12]For an interesting discussion of the violence of the representation of women and deathbed scenes, see Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992).

Engagement," women are seen as a type of Rousseauean tabulae rasae upon which men attempt to create their artistic rendering of woman. In both "The Elegie" and "The Pleasure Pilgrim," the potential male lover becomes master over the victimized female. Schoenemann agrees to the terms of the double standard which condemn Marie to the role of silent victim; similarly, in the story "The Pleasure Pilgrim" Campbell directly incites the emotions which cause Lulie to shoot herself in a masochistic demonstration of her love and loyalty. The tragic fate of these women demonstrates the difficult road to emancipation for the New Woman and female decadents/ce. They become corpses which serve to focus the emotions of the male tormentor in a kind of titillating sadomasochism. Rather than grieve for the loss of his reclaimed lover, Schoenemann creates his Elegie in a state of "unexpected thrillingness" (E M 60) and his "brain was on fire with the excitement, his soul filled with the fierce joy which only the artist knows, and he in the moments of creation alone" (E M 62). Schoenemann creates his famous Elegie out of the joy he receives in the emotions of Marie's death. D'Arcy's estimation of the male emotive capacity is not complimentary as she suggests it can only be accessed through the creation of

a victimized female. He plots Marie's downfall with great anticipation and rapaciousness; his sadistic desire to hurt her becomes a question of his "curiosity to probe sensations" (E M 47) as he "want[s] to be unhappy to see what it [is] like" (E M 46), in order to use his emotions to create a work of art.

Nina Auerbach claims that, in nineteenth-century portrayals of the death of the beloved,

> the entranced woman...seemingly helpless in the grip of her hyperconscious male oppressor, is fully understood only in her translation to majesty. Her trance is not passivity but an ominous gathering of power as she transfigures herself from humanity to beatitude. (40)[13]

D'Arcy's story rejects this view of the objectification

[13]Perhaps this is not as nineteenth-century specific a notion as I had believed. During the revision of this thesis, Diana, Princes of Wales, was killed in an automobile accident in Paris. As I have been reminded by Margaret Van de Pitte and Ludmilla Jordonova, immediately upon her death, Diana was beatified (and forever beautified) by the British people and the world's media without concrete consideration being given to her role as woman, mother, princess, divorcée or aristocratic woman of privilege. Rather, her personal mythology has grown to create a "people's princess" who, "improper" tabloid fodder in life, became the darling of the media "proper" in death. I will further consider Diana's role as beatified beloved in a chapter on Charcot and hysteria in my next full-length study, *Millenial Madness at the Fin(s) de Siècle(s)*.

of a dead woman as empowered; she realizes Marie is merely a "passive object" (E M 49) for Schoenemann's musical creations. Although she "was beautified and ennobled by the hand of Death" (E M 59), Marie is transformed from a self-possessed woman into a victimized Sleeping Beauty who embodies in death the beatitude "Blessed are the pure in heart" (Matthew 5:8). Ironically, Marie's legacy becomes Schoenemann's Elegie, or "song of lamentation for the dead" (OED), which ironically immortalizes Marie, not himself, but it still represents an idealized Marie who, in life and in death, remained unable to express her desires and escape societal constrictions.

While "The Elegie" is a story which exposes the immobilizing effects that male decadents have on women, "The Pleasure Pilgrim" explores the dangers which society creates for a woman who begins to represent a decadent woman. Lulie is a sensual pleasure-seeker who comes to the Castle and meets a writer named Campbell who becomes the object of her desire. D'Arcy suggests that there is some truth to art imitating life and criticises contemporary male writers who seek to reinforce and recreate the ideal in their art. Campbell's sexual and artistic interest is instantly aroused by the highly

unusual Lulie; he quickly realizes that her sexual appeal is a result of her contrast to traditional beauty:

> The girl is beautiful, gorgeously beautiful; every trait, every tint, is in complete, in absolute harmony with the whole. But the truth is, of course, we've all grown accustomed to the obvious, the commonplace; to violent contrast; blue eyes, black eyebrows, yellow hair, the things that shout for recognition. (PP M 141)

D'Arcy follows this portrait with the sensual description of Lulie's hair which "looks as though it had been steeped in red wine" (PP M 141) while dressed in "magnificent apparel" with sensual adornments of "feathers and [a] curving hat" (PP 133).[14] In addition to her Pre-Raphaelite beauty, Lulie projects an earthy, sensuous quality; rather than encouraging distance and idealization, she exudes passion and warmth but, "one has met beautiful women before now. It's her wonderful generosity, her complaisance. She doesn't keep her good things to herself. She doesn't condemn you to admire from a distance" (PP M 141). Lulie expresses openly her

[14]Early in her life, D'Arcy had trained as a painter, a fact which is manifest in many of her fictions as she creates word-pictures in the manner of her Pre-Raphaelite precursors.

desire for Campbell with "velvety red-brown glances" (PP M 142) before she "press[es] your hand under the tablecloth" (PP M 142) in a manner which revolts and disgusts (PP M 154) the effeminate Briton. Lulie is not society's ideal, physically; she is a beauty because of her individuality, precisely that which provokes his "immense accession of interest in her" (PP M 138).

Men's inability to deal with female desire and their reciprocal interest creates a consistent link between morbidity, perversion, and sexuality in D'Arcy's fiction. In "The Pleasure Pilgrim," Campbell approaches Lulie in the manner of Ruskinian manhood:

> The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest is necessary. (59)

Campbell does not approach Lulie with tenderness or understanding; instead, he sees her as a conquest, and sexuality as a war zone where the presecribed roles for the sexes are clear. To this end, Campbell believes the male must be active, while the woman is passive, although "He had no standards for [female] conduct" since "young

American ladies showed no sense of embarrassment whatever" (PP M 133). In his hypocrisy and discomfort, Campbell claims that he refuses Lulie's advances on the basis of her lack of chaste humility:

> if you had any conception of what the passion of love is, how beautiful, how fine, how sacred--the mere idea that you could not come to your lover fresh, pure, untouched, as a young girl should--that you had been handled, fondled, and God knows what besides...would fill you with such horror for yourself, with such supreme disgust--you would feel yourself so unworthy, so polluted.... (PP M 172)

In fact, Campbell is in horror of Lulie's refusal to wear a mask of respectability in favour of being "perverse" (PP M 155). Campbell has "a special fear of being fooled...if he were to let himself go, to get to care very much for a woman...he would lose himself completely, be at her mercy absolutely" (PP M 151). With his revulsion, whether real or feigned, of Lulie's potent sexuality and individuality, Campbell turns his position of possible victim into that of victimizer. He sadistically torments Lulie for her love despite the fact that he believes that "if one could only blot out her [sexual] record, forget it, accept her for what she chose

to appear, a more endearing companion no man could desire" (PP M 165). The conflict is between Campbell's fearful internal desire for Lulie and propriety; he cannot acknowledge Lulie as a potential lover because she would potentially gain power over him through her sexuality which would reverse the power dialectic. D'Arcy's examples of male decadent artists, Schoenemann and Campbell, underscore that their need for an idealized muse rather than a real woman is produced by their fear of what men perceive as chaotic female sexuality.

Gail Cunningham believes that for the female characters of some New Women novelists, "[tragedy] is almost an essential part of the experience; though ostensibly used to show how genuinely difficult it is to escape the established order" (77), a fact reflected in D'Arcy's consistent link between sexuality and morbidity. Lulie must die: she represents a new morality and an acknowledgement of female power which the male-biased society cannot comprehend or allow. D'Arcy also cannot allow Lulie to live under the domination of Campbell/male power: to subordinate her sexuality to his control would be to deny her right to individual desire. This intense conflict between individuality and society is reflected in Lulie's captivation with the castle. Lulie expresses

an aesthetic and sensual fascination with the Castle's medieval and "delightful iron collar and chain" (PP M 136); she revels in "[the thought] of being chained up there like a dog...[because it is] so wonderfully picturesque" (PP M 136) that she

> persuaded Mr. Mayne, a decadent voyeur, to fix the collar around [her neck...[and it] seemed to require a good deal of persuasion to get [him] to unfix the collar again (PP M 136)

around her pale neck.

Lulie's reaction to the collar and chain not only suggest a nonconformist expression of sexuality, but it also depicts a parallel to the restrictions placed upon a woman by British society. Campbell's amateur attempts at psychoanalysis reduces Lulie to the stereotype of *femme fatale*; he claims "[Lulie] does it for mere devilry, for a laugh. Or, and this is another theory, she is actuated by some idea of retribution" (PP M 147) because she is "the Nemesis for her sex" (PP M 147) who seeks revenge upon the male sex. Even worse,

> can it be that she is simply the newest development of the New Woman--she who in England preaches and bores you, and in America practises and pleases?
>
> Yes, [Campbell] believe[s] she's the American

> edition, and so new that she hasn't yet found her way into fiction. She's the pioneer of the army coming out of the West, that's going to destroy the existing scheme of things, and rebuild it nearer to the heart's desire. (PP M 147)[15]

The comparison between the American New Woman and the English New Woman indicates, perhaps, D'Arcy's desire for the New Woman movement to advance at a quicker pace in England. It is Lulie's attempt to escape the English restrictions and express her desire which inevitably leads to her downfall in a society which views Lulie's pilgrimage for pleasure as heinous because she searched only for "fresh sensations" and "opportunities" on her travels which are taken, not "for profit, but for pleasure" (PP M 144) in a sensual search for l'art pour l'art. While Campbell is unable to accept the reality of Lulie's decadent "genre" (PP M 156), the omnipresent Mr. Mayne gives Campbell an alternative scenario. He declares Lulie to be an "actress...[who] has a great respect for her rôle" which he foreshadows she will carry

[15]This male fear of the American Girl in Europe is not limited to the fiction of decadence. Henry James uses such a theme in both *Daisy Miller* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, although the latter fiction does contain decadent male characters.

out "to the bitter end" (PP M 157). In fact, Mr. Mayne is correct. The "dog-like humility" (PP M 164) which Lulie adopts in her attempt to win Cambell's affection is the very mask of respectable womanhood he wishes her to wear. Campbell demands her death out of "sufficient decency"; her masquerade requires her death as a "consummate actress" (PP M 175).

In the tragic cases of both Marie and Lulie, they embody what Elisabeth Bronfen, in *Over Her Dead Body*, calls "the dead beloved as muse." The women, through the paradox of their self-assertion and self-submission, become "an imitation of cultural clichés, hovering between irony and kitsch" (Bronfen 361) in order to expose the difficulties a woman has in order to make herself into a subject, rather than an object, of discourse. In both cases, death from a broken heart and from an artistic role, the women become the "creatrix" (Bronfen 376) of their own deaths as artwork far superior to any art, either music or text, which the male artists, Schonemann or Campbell respectively, can produce. Unfortunately, the enmeshed paradigms of femininity and death seem to liberate the male decadents' petrified artistic powers by preserving her image as symbolic fetish which the men can draw upon for artistic

intoxication; more importantly, it exposes the truth of male artistic self-sufficiency as illusory and fraudulent. In fact, it asserts Baudrillard's contention that "the masculine [here, decadent male art] has always been a residual, secondary and fragile formation, one that must be defended by retrenchments, institutions, and artifices" (16). D'Arcy's texts foreground this hypocrisy of the male decadent artist who only gains his artistic powers at the loss of his beloved, and his preference for a reanimated version of her to the real woman whom he rejected.

A reviewer of D'Arcy, Janet E. Hogarth, claimed in *The Fortnightly Review* that

> sex mania in art and literature can be but a passing phase, and possibly the modern heroine's admirable manner of expressing herself may outlast her repulsive qualities, to the exceeding great benefit of literature and society. (592)

D'Arcy herself claimed that the *fin-de-siècle* in Britain "is a weird world, and I'm inclined to give up Art and Literature...Decadence, and go back to the comfortably prosaic circles" (Mix 147) of a woman writer not aligned with such a study of human nature. Perhaps there is irony in the use of monochrome in the title of D'Arcy's

first volume of work: a picture which is done in (different tints of) one colour or in black and white (OED) only would seemingly indicate that women such as Egerton and D'Arcy see issues of gender, sex and decadence only in Beardsley black and white. Perhaps it is more accurate to understand that both Egerton and D'Arcy's detailed portraits of women represent the many shades of the colour that is the decadent woman who comes into full maturity in the writings of France's Decadent Dominatrix --Rachilde.

Chapter Five

Decadent Dominatrix: *Monsieur* Rachilde, *Homme des Lettres*

> For that masculine subject of desire, trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female "object" who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position. The radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female "Other" suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory.
>
> --Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* vii

"Rachilde" and her heroines represent the poisonous threat to the male decadent worldview which had been so carefully foreshadowed by the developing female decadents/ce of Alcott, Egerton and D'Arcy. Until recently, for several decades, critics such as Jean Pierrot and Maurice Barrès dismiss Rachilde's[1]

insufficient attempts at decadence as "not depraved. In spite of those pages which mean...to be sadistic and which are merely quite naïve and confused...[her fiction] can be considered as a curiosity" (*Monsieur Venus*[2] 7) written only by a "little girl...not privy to [the] aesthetic" (*MV* 2) of mature decadent men, and whose work has "too much a whiff of virginal ignorance" (*MV* 4). Recently, a few feminist scholars including Jennifer Birkett, Melanie Hawthorne, and Marilyne Lukacher have begun to approach, both through critical readings and translations of several texts, the work of Rachilde in order to try to recover her writing for the female tradition, not only for her preoccupation with the perversion of love, but for the scope of her massive

[1]One of two pseudonym's chosen by Marguerite Eymery during her writing career: Rachilde for most of her works, and "Jean de Childra" for the notorious *La Princess des Ténèbres* (1896) which she correctly anticipated would cause a large furor with the public. Rachilde very much believed in the decadent arts of mesmerism and channelling. She was a medium and avid participant in seances, apparently choosing her pseudonym on the basis of her "communications" with the beyond; or, perhaps, from her unconscious self.

[2]Rachilde's texts were originally published as *Monsieur Vénus* (*Monsieur Venus*) and *La Jongleuse* (*The Juggler*). For reasons of clarity, page references for fictional quotations will be by novel rather than author.

oeuvre. While the best known of her texts, including *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), *La Marquise de Sade* (1887) *Madame Adonis* (1888), and *Théâtre: Madame la Mort, Le Vendeur de Soleil, La Voix du Sang* (1891) as well as others, are decadent in theme and style, she also wrote short tales of the fantastic such as "La Panthère" (1900) which are reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe, short sensual tales like "Les Vendanges de Sodome" (1900),[3] as well as a political manifesto, "Pourquoi Je Ne Suis Pas Féministe" (1928) where, in a chapter on love, she interestingly laments that love opens the brain of an individual and the object of that love is truly insignificant. Two other of her texts, *Quand J'étais Jeune* (1947) and *Face à la Peur* (1942) hold interest for feminist scholars for their autobiographical content.

Some critics I have read, like Jennifer Birkett, believe that Rachilde's writing is misogynist because

> her creative imagination [seems to be] at the service of male masochistic fantasies, acting out the temporary triumph of the vengeful female and the humiliating overthrow of the male--subject to the

[3]Both of these short tales were published initially in *Le Mercure de France*.

> reinstatement of paternal power...[in her] mediocre works. (61)

Other critics, such as Maryline Lukacher in *Maternal Fictions,* acknowledge that Rachilde's writing is not easily assimilated as feminist, but that both masculine and feminine conventions are indicted in order to demonstrate that sexual relations cannot be rid of violence within the double standards of society. Lukacher hypothesizes that, in texts like *La Jongleuse,* Rachilde "adopts stereotypes only in order to demonstrate their absurdity" (151); in fact, one of Lukacher's strongest points is that she reads all of Rachilde's texts as a type of metaphoric "juggling" (151) with decadent motifs to show their phallocentric bias.

The most prolific of these feminist critics, Melanie C. Hawthorne, has considered Rachilde in two major articles, "*Monsieur Venus*: A Critique of Gender Roles" and "The Social Construction of Sexuality in Three Novels by Rachilde," in which she reads the respective texts from a marxist-feminist ideology. Hawthorne's central interest is in the position of Rachilde's women as aristocrats who seek to exploit their social position for

the power conferred by class privilege.[4] Rachilde's texts, according to Hawthorne, lack a strong feminist/critical stance in regard to prescriptive class hierarchies; in fact, she believes that in *Monsieur Venus*, the female protagonist's, Raoule de Venerande, decision to marry her lover, Jacques, neutralizes the possibility of disrupting class privilege and male authority through scandal (Hawthorne 1988: 174). Hawthorne sees class privilege as a prerequisite to Raoule's autonomy because in the nineteenth century a woman could only aspire to independence through economic, social and class status. In *Monsieur Venus*, Rachilde points out that only those people who already have some degree of power are in a position to make changes in the system; therefore, it is only because Raoule has privilege in one power structure (class) that she can

[4]For these reasons in particular, Rachilde's text was thought scandalous and *Monsieur Venus* was banned; once published in Brussels (1884), it was seized by the authorities. A fine as well as a prison sentence of two years was imposed on Rachilde. As a result, Rachilde acquired a reputation as a pornographer and was nefariously, yet complimentarily, dubbed "Mademoiselle Baudelaire" by Maurice Barrès and was often mistaken in her masculine garb as "Monsieur Rachilde," a fact reflected in her calling cards which read "Rachilde, homme des lettres."

have an impact on a related structure (gender).

While I agree with Hawthorne's assessment of the nature of class relations within Rachilde's texts, I believe that it is indispensable to an understanding of Rachilde's place in female decadence to acknowledge her challenges to the conventional ideas of woman's innately passive sexuality which create a scandalous female subject. This inquiry proposes to move beyond questions of how Rachilde's position is different from other female-authored texts of the nineteenth century, to how it is related to and/or different from not only male-authored decadent texts, but also how her fiction supports the female decadent project. Unfortunately, all of the previously mentioned critics seem to seek an example of a female and/or female sexuality that reflects back *male* decadence in Rachilde's texts. Rachilde's female decadents/ce directly returns the gaze of the men who seek to limit and/or objectify them, and embody a politicized decadent female sexuality which disrupts gender role as well as the role of the decadent artist.

In *Monsieur Venus* (1884) and *La Jongleuse* (1900), Rachilde's heroines usurp the role of dominant sexual partner and decadent artist. The portrayal of the woman

as psychosexual aggressor is responsible for her domination of the male through her perverse displays of self-mastery and control. The hierarchy challenged is the binary opposition or dialectic of male-authored decadence with female passivity rather than a multiplicity of possible social classes. Rachilde's females represent Nietzschean discontented women who have a will to power which takes the form of sexualized art. It is by virtue of the woman's usurpation and appropriation of the position of the artist in several manifestations--performer, sculptor, writer--that she can be considered a decadent.

Monsieur Vénus explores the artifice of language, literature and gender; in addition, Rachilde's text describes gender and desire from a woman's point of view, both as author and as character. Written in 1884, the scandalous erotic content and the inversion of social mores and conventions places this text within the realm of decadence. From the text's opening, Rachilde questions the integrity of what is considered natural and the value of artifice when her main character, Raoule de Vénérande, enters an artifical flower shop to order a floral decoration for her masquerade ball gown. While

there, Raoule sees a beautiful, effeminate man named Jacques Silvert amongst the artificial flowers he creates and arranges. Raoule is immediatedly "vertiginously drawn" (*MV* 16)[5] to him because his "look was like that of a beseeching dog in pain, with a slight wetness on the pupils of the eyes. Those animal tears so dreadful to behold" (*MV* 13)[6]; once she discovers that he is without money and is without talent as an aspiring artist, Raoule obtains a studio for Jacques and his aging prostitute sister, Marie.

Unconventional even in her affairs of thought, their affair progresses at Raoule's design because "mental activity nearly always took preeminence over actual situations" (*MV* 18)[7]; as a result, the tempo and tenor of their relationship is entirely dictated by her desire. Raoule becomes increasingly the "master" (*MV* 27)[8]. Called by men's names, Raoule begins to dress in "almost

[5]"Une sorte de vertige l'attirait" (Rachilde 1888: 34).

[6]"Il regardait, cet homme, comme implorent les chiens souffrants, avec une vague humidité sur les prunelles. Ces larmes d'animal poignent toujours d'une manière atroce" (Rachilde 1888: 29).

[7]"L'activité cérébrale remplaçait presque toujours les situations positives" (Rachilde 1888: 36).

[8]"Je suis bien le maître, n'est-ce pas?" (Rachilde 1888: 52).

masculine attire" (*MV* 29)[9], to practice fencing, and to reveal her increasingly sadistic nature.[10] In parallel fashion, Jacques's feminine attributes begin to eclipse his masculine nature as he "wallowed in...[his] feminine trousseau" (*MV* 28)[11]. Raoule "is an artist" (*MV* 25)[12]; she exotically decorates Jacque's studio with "wood of the Indies" and a "Venus de Milo" and other busts to showcase Jacques as her affianced bride (*MV* 28)[13]. In an open display of voyeurism and power, Raoule watches Jacques in the bathtub in a manner which "even between men...is unseemly" (*MV* 31)[14]. Her gaze fetishizes the

[9]"ce costume presque masculin" (Rachilde 1888: 56).

[10]Although I have tried not to import biographical criticism into this project, Rachilde's life does suggest a comparison. Born as the daughter of an officer, she was raised by her father. In itself, this may not be of significance, but there is one point that should give us pause as readers of her texts filled with dominant women who cross-dress: her father raised her *as a boy* because he desired a son at any cost rather than an insignificant girl-child. This may be truly most evident in her text *La Marquise de Sade* (1887) where she retells, through a thin veil, the story of her boyhood in her father's regiment and her resulting sadistic sexuality. For a later fictional retelling of her autobiography, see the late novel *Face à la Peur* (1942).

[11]"Il se vautra...[dans] son trousseau de femme" (Rachilde 1888: 54).

[12]"est une artiste" (Rachilde 1888: 49).

[13]"les chevalets de bois des îles furent mis en troupe dans l'angle où se dressait une Vénus de Milo" (Rachilde 1888: 50).

[14]"même entre hommes ce n'est pas convenable" (Rachilde 1888: 59).

> small of the back, where the spine's curve is drawn into a voluptuous smoothness that then rises in two adorably firm, plump contours akin to the marble of Paros with its amber transparencies, was worthy of a Venus Callipyge. The thighs, though somewhat less robust than those of a woman, had yet a solid rotundity that belied their sex (*MV* 31)[15]

as Jacques is metaphorically sculpted into her marble (wo)man.

Overcoming any residual sense of weakness, Raoule reminds Jacques that he is not a "playmate to a girl of noble birth. Depraved women know their own mind" (*MV* 33)[16] and what she desires is "Possession without delay, violence, wanton intoxication and oblivion" (*MV* 32)[17]. "Monsieur de Venerande" (*MV* 31, Rachilde 1888: 55)) refuses the more passive role of Sappho because "to be

[15]"Digne de la Vénus Callipyge, cette chute de reins où la ligne de l'épine dorsale fuyait dans un méplat voluptueux et se redressait, ferme, grasse, en deux contours adorables, avait l'aspect d'une sphère de Paros aux transparences d'ambre. Les cuisses, un peu moins fortes que des cuisses de femme, possédaient pourtant une rondeur solide qui effaçait leur sexe" (Rachilde 1888: 59).

[16]"on n'est pas le camarade d'une fille noble. Les dépravées savent choisir!" (Rachilde 1888: 62).

[17]"la possession tout de suite, la brutalité, l'ivresse stupide et l'oublie" (Rachilde 1888: 61).

Sapphic would be like everyone" (*MV* 50)[18], or at least, to be Sapphic would feed male fantasy rather than violently disrupt it. Given the dilemma of a "lack of feeling or lack of power" (*MV* 52)[19], Raoule chooses to maintain her power. Raoule and Jacques form a couple that is composed of two beings with aporetic gender identities.

In the rhetoric of the text, when Raoule looks for the object of her desire, she finds metaphors for her own female gender in the artificial flowers and "the narrow passage....Then, since the key was in the lock, she entered. But, on the threshold, the smell of apples cooking caught in her throat and stopped her short" (*MV* 11)[20]. Raoule sends Jacques flowers, he makes flowers and is described by the metaphor traditionally associated with women. He veils himself; she undresses herself. Jacques is natural while Raoule is degenerate. Raoule lifts him up and carries him; she is the one solicited

[18]"être Sapho, ce serait être tout le monde" (Rachilde 1888: 90).

[19]"brutalité ou impuissance. Tel est le dilemme" (Rachilde 1888: 92-93).

[20]"l'étroit couloir.... Puis, la clef étant sur la porte, elle entra; mais, sur le seuil, une odeur de pommes cuissant la prit à la gorge et l'arrêta net" (Rachilde 1888: 25-26).

by a female prostitute; she is challenged to a duel; she is called by the names "*honnête homme*," "*monsieur*," and "*maître*." Jacques is referred to as the "*épouse*," and the feminine "*fiancée*." Finally, Raoule names him "*Madame* de Venerande" (*MV* 108, Rachilde 1888: 188); the woman usurps the power to name the man in a subversive reversal of traditional marriage. In addition, the description of her entry into the florists, decadent in its stylized purple prose, depicts in vivid metaphorical images Raoule's own body as well as the body of the effeminate Jacques; it is precisely his femininity that attracts "Raoule de Venerande, so cold an orgy cannot warm her...felt the scalding of her being before a man so weak as a young girl?" (*MV* 32)[21] in "wild admiration for the handsome instrument of pleasure that she desired" (*MV* 18)[22].

Raoule's sexual desire has been shaped by her "father [who] had been one of those exhausted libertines whom the works of the Marquis de Sade cause to blush, but

[21]"Raoule de Vénérande, qu'une orgie laisse froide, se sent-elle bouillir le crâne devant un homme faible comme une jeune fille?" (Rachilde 1888: 61).

[22]"une folle admiration pour le bel instrument de plaisir qu'elle désirait" (Rachilde 1888: 37).

for reasons other than indecency" (*MV* 22)[23] and by books of engravings which her Aunt Elisabeth took away when "the young girl experienced a radical change" (*MV* 22)[24]. Raoule responds to "any reason that opposed her with an answering unconstrained hedonism...[and] a frightening tenacity" (*MV* 22)[25]; unable to comprehend such a voracious sexual appetite in a woman, a physician compares her to the hysterical women of Charcot's Salpêtrière because "she knows not vice, but she invents it!" (*MV* 23)[26]. This misunderstanding of Raoule's desire as hysterical rather than decadently perverse[27] parallels and prefigures certain of Freud's texts on female sexuality. Freud claims that, in the case of certain women, desire remains narcissistic, whereas man's desire turns to object choice:

[23]"père [qui] avait été un de ces débauchés épuisés que les oeuvres du marquis de Sade font rougir, mais pour une autre raison que celle de la pudeur" (Rachilde 1888: 43).

[24]"une révolution s'opéra dans la jeune fille" (Rachilde 1888: 44).

[25]"les raisonnements qu'on lui opposait avec des réponses pleines d'une désinvolture épicurienne" (Rachilde 1888: 42).

[26]"Elle ne connaît pas le vice, mais elle l'invente!" (Rachilde 1888: 45).

[27]This conflation of the two categories reflects the situation found earlier in several critics' misconceptualization of George Egerton and Ella D'Arcy as benignly neurotic rather than as powerfully decadent.

> A different course is followed in the type of female most frequently met with, which is probably the purest and truest one. With the onset of puberty the maturing of the female sexual organs, which up till then have been in a condition of latency, seems to bring about an intensification of the original narcissism, and this is unfavourable to the development of a true object-choice with its accompanying sexual overvaluation. (192)

Such a woman desires herself, and indeed this link between feminity and narcissism emerges clearly in two parallel mirror scenes contained within *Monsieur Venus*.

The first scene has Raoule, now a masculinized *femme fatale*, look at her own image in a reflection which makes her feel feminine when the "mirror in the Brougham gave her back her image, the fineness of her bosom rustling with lace. She had a pleasure in feeling womanly" (*MV* 41)[28]. Jacques, the effeminate man, looks in the mirror at Raoule's urging, and they both see that he is pretty. Raoule says to him "You are so handsome, dear creature,

[28]"La glace du coupé lui renvoyait son image, son corsage ruisselant de dentelles allait bien, elle se sentait *femme* jusqu'au plaisir" (Rachilde 1888: 76).

that you are more beautiful than I! See in that mirror hanging there your pink and white neck like a child's" (*MV* 63)[29]. Jacques must, importantly, maintain his masculinity because he can then reflect for Raoule a narcissistic image of her masculine Other because "he isn't even a hermaphrodite, nor even impotent; he is a handsome male twenty-one years old" (*MV* 54)[30]. Raoule is fascinated by Jacques' bisexuality, which reflects and reverses her own desire to "love Jacques as an affianced husband hopelessly loves his dead fiancée" (*MV* 54)[31]. The two members of the couple begin to reflect each other in a reversed mirror image and permit each other a paradoxical narcissistic object love.

Raoule becomes masculine in her cultural attributes and, by turning her narcissistic desire to object choice, she desires like a man; however, to say that desire must always be masculine when it is desire for the Other does

[29]"Tu es si beau, chère créature, que tu es plus belle que moi! Regarde là-bas dans la glace penchée, ton cou blanc et rose, comme un cou d'enfant!" (Rachilde 1888: 110). As "créature" is feminine in french, this allows Raoule to address Jacques as "she" in comparison.

[30]"ce n'est pas même un hermaphrodite, pas même un impuissant, c'est un beau mâle de vingt et un ans" (Rachilde 1888: 96).

[31]"j'aimerai Jacques comme un fiancé aime sans espoir la fiancée morte" (Rachilde 1888: 97).

not adequately do justice to Rachilde's attempt to foreground subversion as her subject. If this text parallels Freud's ideas on narcissism and its resolution in object-choice, then it also subverts it; until the end of the novel, Raoule remains bisexual in outlook and appearance, both male and female. Briefly, Jacques develops a complimentary desire, and as a couple, they rewrite the story of Plato's androgyne:

> He did not contrive to support his partner, but with her he was but a single form, a single figure, a single being. Seeing them close, turning and melting into an embrace where flesh, clothes notwithstanding, joined flesh, one could imagine the single godhead of love within two entities, the complete individual spoken of in the fabulous tales of the Brahmins, two distinct sexes in a single monster. (*MV* 108)[32]

Plato's two beings, one male and one female, split in

[32]"Il ne cherchait pas à soutenir sa danseuse, mais il ne formait avec elle qu'une taille, qu'un buste, qu'un être. A les voir pressés, tournoyants et fondus dans une étreinte où les chairs, malgré leur vêtements, se collaient aux chairs, on s'imaginait la seule divinité de l'amour en deux personnes, l'individu *complet* dont parlent les récits fabuleux des brahmanes, deux sexes distincts en un unique monstre" (Rachilde 1888: 186-187).

two, along with the third heterosexual being who splits into male and female; in this case, each being is already split into two, and the unity formed by the couple is a fluid combination of multiple possibilities.[33]

This relation is not tendered as a wonderful utopian relation between the sexes but is condemned both implicitly and explicitly: implicitly, in the atmosphere of debauchery and decadent dissolution that pervades the novel; explicitly, there is an overt transgression of social codes and conventions. For example: Raoule and Jacques belong to different classes, and even Raittolbe says their impending marriage is revolting and monstrous. What he perceives as monstrous is the crossing over of society's prescriptive boundaries; Jacques Silvert is killed metaphorically by the class and group in power for his transgressions of society, sexuality and gender with Raoule although he dies by the blade of the aristocratic representative, Raittolbe.

Just as Jacques threatens Raittolbes's sense of his

[33]In *Gender on the Divide*, Jessica Feldman has made the significant observation that in the myths of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, it is the woman who disappears in the unified being (44).

own masculinity, he threatens society's structure in the sense that he represents the forbidden desire to cross class as well as gender boundaries in an attempt to disrupt heirarchical systematization. At the ball, the other noblemen succumb to this desire, even though they despise Jacques's circumstance of birth and lack of aristocratic privilege:

> Jacques' head was thrown back, still with its lovelorn maiden's smile; his parted lips displayed his pearly teeth, and his eyes, enlarged by a bluish ring, still kept their moist shine. Beneath his thick head of hair could be seen his small ears, that bloomed like purple flowers. The same inexplicable shiver went through them all. Jacques passed by without noticing them, a curved hip beneath the black suit momentarily brushing against them...And all of them together clenched their now

clammy fists. (*MV* 109)[34]

The homoeroticism evident in the nobles' clenched fists, in Raittolbe's violent desire, and in Jacques effeminacy challenges the social construct of the binary opposition of acceptable desire and sexuality.

Rachilde goes one step farther in her psychological study to reveal man's bisexual nature. Raoule decides to marry Jacques in order to make an honest man of him as her mistress; however, the couple is rejected by all classes of society because of the social inappropriateness of their union. Ostracized by the entire social spectrum, they find their only friend is Raittolbe, who is still horrified by their relationship when "inversion seemed the only admissible regime" (*MV* 53)[35] for perverse desire, and who becomes ashamed at his

[34]"Jacques, la tête renversée, avait encore son sourire de fille amoureuse; ses lèvres relevées laissaient voir ses dents de nacre, ses yeux, agrandis d'un cercle bleuâtre, conservaient une humidité rayonnante, et, sous ses cheveux épais, sa petite oreille, épanouie comme une fleur de pourpre, leur donna, à tous, le même frisson inexplicable. Jacques passa, ne les ayant pas remarqués; sa hanche, cambrée sous l'habit noir, les frôla une seconde.... et d'un même mouvement, ils crispèrent leurs mains devenues moites" (Rachlde 1888: 189).

[35]"où l'inversion semblait être le seul régime admis" (Rachilde 1888: 96).

own desire for the effeminate Jacques. In an attempt to return Jacques to a conventional sense of the masculine and to eliminate his own desire for Jacques, Raittolbe arranges a visit for the men to Marie's brothel. While there, Jacques discovers that he can no longer love women after his "savage dominatrix" (*MV* 62)[36] who humiliates him by calling him "a capricious little woman" (*MV* 64)[37] until he had begun "to play out the role for himself, taking on the part of woman for the sake of artifice" (*MV* 67)[38]. Jacques tries to seduce Raittolbe which results in homoerotic, sexualized violence of sabres and riding crops as Raittolbe "[falls] prey...to a twin perversion" (*MV* 82)[39]. Jacques, and to some extent Raittolbe, begin to submit to Raoule's narcissistic desire which causes both men to risk losing their conventional masculinity. When Jacques arrives at Raittolbe's home dressed as Raoule, his own wife, the game ends; Raoule arrives in "her nocturnal masquerade" (*MV* 69)[40] of male drag, she

[36]"sa farouche dominatrice" (Rachilde 1888: 109).
[37]"une petite femme capricieuse" (Rachilde 1888: 112).
[38]"se jouant la comédie vis-à-vis de lui-même, se prenant à être une femme pour le plaisir de l'art" (Rachilde 1888: 117).
[39]"la proie d'une double bestialité" (Rachilde 1888: 144).
[40]"déguisement nocturne" (Rachilde 1888: 120).

discovers Jacque's feeble attempt at seduction. The betrayal forces "her valiant man's nature [to take] the upper hand" (*MV* 134)[41]; consequently, the two transvestites switch clothing and switch back to their prescribed social roles. Jacques has become too feminine, and the delicate balance of his relation with Raoule is destroyed; as the symbolic, idealized female, Jacques dies in a duel.

In *Monsieur Venus*, the reversals are initially mechanical and the identity politics suspect; however, the constant reversals point to the possibility that gender is superficial and/or artificial. In effect, gender can be assumed and discarded at will. For Rachilde, woman's desire and gender identification are involved with decadent reversals of normal heterosexual identity and desire where "Raoule...[is] That girl who isn't one" (*MV* 131)[42]. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray asks:

> Does female bisexuality not figure as an inverted recapitulation of the "program" masculine sexuality

[41]"cependant sa vaillante nature d'homme reprit un moment le dessus" (Rachilde 1888: 229).
[42]Raoule....[est] espèce de fille manquée" (Rachilde 1888: 225).

> writes for itself. As a projection, upside down and backward, of the end--the telos--of male sexuality's history? (111)

The inclusion in *Monsieur Venus* of these reversals of male/female roles found in transsexual clothing, sexual attitudes, and gender relations which cause the binaries Irigaray speaks of as normative for bisexuality to begin to lose their stabilizing or normative power. Questions arise out of what is scandalous, which gender is which, whether the theme of this text is a woman's love for a man, a man's love for a woman, a woman's love for herself or for another woman, or a man's love for himself or for another man. In his confusion in the face of Raoule's declaration that "I am a man in love with a man, not a woman" (*MV* 53) to which Raittolbe responds "She is a man in love...with a man! Immortal gods!...have pity on me! I think my mind is giving way" (*MV* 53)[43]. The decadent, upside-down world Raoule creates leads to an inquiry into the artifical nature of gender identity.

The traditional plot wherein the heroine is

[43]"Je suis *amoureux* d'un homme et non pas d'une femme.... Elle est *amoureux* d'un...hom...me! Dieux immortels!....prenez pitié de moi! Je crois que ma cervelle s'écroule!" (Rachilde 1888: 95).

unquestionably the victim of sensuality is curiously intolerable when the victim is the male hero. Rachilde's heroines are understood correctly, if inadvertently, by such critics as George Ridge to the label sadomasochists who, like Raoule, always "control, corrupt, and destroy their pliable men" (138). According to Barrès, this "inversion of the instincts, this worshipping of a base creature as pretty as a child, as plump and puny as a woman but of male sex, already has precedence in human experience" (*MV* 5) but he has "never known anything more mysterious than this knowing depravity that erupts in the dreams of a virgin" (*MV* 1). Rachilde's inversion of the approval of the control, corruption, and destruction of female victims and the disapproval of the same fate for male victims should give us, as readers, pause. Similarly, sadistic behaviour and desire, not necessary equivalent, are all acceptable when associated with men, but not when associated with innocent girls such as the young Rachilde.

In any case, the "innocent" Rachilde's invention of this erotic, sadistic plot points out the coded nature of both desire and decadent textuality as artificial. Raoule is called at one point a man who is handsome "as

any fictional hero [of whom] a young girl might dream like all the heroes in novels of which young women dream" (*MV* 121)[44]. This odd metaphor points out its own fictional nature in a structure in which the hero, Raoule, becomes the hero of the novel of other young women, and has been dreamed into the text by the young female author, Rachilde. The clearest indication of the text's own aestheticism is the image of Jacques as a work of art created by Raoule/Rachilde. Raoule needs, as she says, to create a work of art that she is able to relate to her own sexual desire:

> "I have had lovers. Lovers in my life as I have books in my library, for knowledge, for study...but I have never had passion, I have never written my own book!" (*MV* 51)[45]

Woman's exclusion from desire, in the form of Raoule's passionless affairs makes the creation of her own story/text impossible. It is only once Raoule experiences passion that she can become the artist and

[44]"renvoyait l'image d'un homme beau comme tous les héros de roman que rêvent les jeunes filles" (Rachilde 1888: 208).

[45]"j'ai des amants. Des amants dans ma vie comme j'ai des livres dans ma bibliothèque, pour savoir, pour étudier.... Mais je n'ai pas eu de passion, je n'ai pas écrit mon livre, moi!" (Rachilde 1888: 91).

create Jacques from his hidden femininity into a "pale face in the shadows [which] seemed to her to be like the face of a statue" (*MV* 28), a statue reminiscent of the Hellenism[46] of some British decadents as well as Alcott's marble women. As the "élite of women of [the] day [and as an] example of the feminine as artist" (*MV* 51)[47] who creates with exotic props, hashish, masquerade and morbidity, Raoule turns Jacques into a sexualized mannequin: a male Anatomical Venus. The text she writes is Jacques's body through paradoxical nature. Jacques, "whose body was a poem, knew that this poem would always be read with more attention than any letter from such a rough hand as his" (*MV* 86)[48]. Woman's writing, both Raoule and Rachilde's, is no more natural than the male writing which precedes it; rather, it points out its own artificial invention as it plays with the restraints of

[46]There are many references to Greek gods and goddesses in the text, including Diana, Antinous, Venus and Hermaphroditus, as well as a self-reference of Raoule to her role as Socrates, which could be fruitful in a future discussion, especially if combined with Rachilde's own *Madame Adonis* and Alcott's Hellenistic references to Socrates and Alcibiades.

[47]"l'élite des femmes de notre époque. Un échantillon du feminin artiste et du féminin artiste et du féminin grande dame" (Rachilde 1888: 92).

[48]"dont le corps était un poème, savait que ce poème serait toujours lu avec plus d'attention que la lettre d'un vulgaire écrivain comme lui" (Rachilde 1888: 151).

convention. The end product of these women's creation is the (art)ificial/ (art)ifactual Venus, the machinations of fiction and gender, a male Venus that is both real and mythic, male and female. Woman's writing creates the unnatural as Raoule's desire destroys life and artificially creates a monster. Again, the consistent link in morbidity and sexuality supports the idea that with the death of the natural comes the birth of woman's art and desire; woman's writing becomes a decadent exposure and inversion of the natural order where female "decadence [is] Nietschean in its effort at self-creation out of the chaos of existence" (Reed 15).

La Jongleuse is a further development of the decadent cluster of ideas or themes of artifice, ornamentation, exoticism, and ennui; more importantly, it continues the discussion of female decadent sexuality and its connection to self-sufficient performance at the exclusion of the male subject. The text opens with the singular, unnatural appearance of Madame Eliante Donalger because

> what showed above her funereal envelope seemed very artificial: a painted doll's face, decorated with a bonnet of smooth, shining hair with steely glints,

> hair that stuck to the temples, too twisted, too fine, so fine it seemed like imitation silk, a shred of her black dress, that satiny, almost metallic, sheath. With such a tight hairstyle set above thin red ears that seemed literally to bleed under the weight of a sharp-edged helmet, she was whiter with her makeup than any other made-up woman. (*J* 1)[49]

This phallic woman[50] stands amongst her meticulously ornamented rooms which contain the two favoured artifacts, a mirror and a marble statue, which create a telling juxtaposition of the animalistic woman with the exoticism of decadence because "the mirror reflected only

[49]"ce qui sortait de son enveloppe funèbre semblait très artificiel: une face de poupée peinte, ornée d'un bonnet de cheveaux lisses, brillants, à reflets d'acier, des cheveux se collant aux tempes, trop tordus, trop fins, si fins qu'ils imitaient la soierie, un lambeau de sa rove noire, cette gaine satinée presque métallique. Ainsi coiffée d'une coiffure étroite posée sur de minces oreilles rouges qui paraissaient vraiment saigner sous le poids d'un casque coupant, elle était plus blanche de son fard qu'aucune autre femme fardée" (Rachilde 1925: 8).

[50]In her Introduction to *Daughters of Decadence*, Elaine Showalter rightly points out that "In decadent writing, women are seen as bound to Nature and the material world because they are more physical than men, more body than spirit. They appear as objects of value only when they are aaestheticised as corpses or phallicised as femmes fatales" (x). I use the term "phallic" here with the specific intention of opposing those "phallicised" women with a woman who denies herself physical pleasure in clothing or sexuality; in fact, she embodies the decadent phallus in her attire and strength.

the marble statue of a nymph holding a candelabrum...the dark silhouette of the motionless woman, equally a statue...[became] even less real" (*J* 4)[51] to the young, male, medical student who views the tableau, Leon Reille. Mesmerised by her presence, his interest is aroused by the homoerotic nature of her dress because "the whole fabric had stiffened into an iron bar and the decorous costume, the chaste sheath" which "detached itself...from the woman, giving her up to the electric lights more naked, despite her blackness, than the marble statue...[in her] silken scabbard" (*J* 4)[52]. Surrounded by artificiality of light and fabric as well as an oriental stole, Eliante declares she is "suffering...from spleen" (*J* 9)[53] but invites him to her home.

The rendez-vous continues with Leon's declaration that her lack of feminine decorum is unnatural, but that she amuses him as a "curious object" *J* 9)[54]. In the

[51]"la glace ne reflétait que la statue de marbre, là-bas, une nymphe tenant une torchère...la silhouette obscure de la femme immobile, également statue...moins réelle encore" (Rachilde 1925: 8).

[52]"toute l'étoffe se roidissant en barre de fer et le costume correct, la gaine chaste se détachait...de la femme, la livrant aux transparences électriques plus nue, malgré sa noirceur, que la statue de marble" (Rachilde 1925: 9).

[53]"J'ai...le spleen" (Rachilde 1925: 13).

[54]"un objet curieux" (Rachilde 1925: 13).

fashion of a decadent woman, Eliante laughs at his naïve understanding of the power dialectics of the situation; in fact, she "[feels] sorry for the very person who was trying out, on her, his brand new male cruelty" (*J* 9)[55], one which she quickly exploits for her own enjoyment as he swoons from the strength of her "penetrating perfume" (*J* 10)[56]. In the decadent set piece of a dinner party, Eliante's meal further confuses Leon's senses as she transgressively mixes salty truffles with sweet bananas in an unnatural appetite for aphrodisiacs in the Chinese system of spices which is enough to "set a harem ablaze...including the eunuchs" (*J* 14)[57]. As Leon begins to lose his masculinity and becomes an objet d'art in the ornamented room, he begins to lash out sadistically at Eliante, accusing her of "suffering, [being] ill , or distressed, an ether drinker, or a morphine addict... [because] the blue veins along [her] wrist...are almost violet" (*J* 10)[58], a fact which he finds exquisite.

[55]"Elle plaignait celui qui essayait, sur elle, sa toute neuve cruauté de mâle" (Rachilde 1925: 13).
[56]"la paume voluptueuse" (Rachilde 1925: 14).
[57]"faire flamber un sérail... y compris les eunuques" (Rachilde 1925: 18).
[58]"souffrante, malade ou chagrine, buveuse d'éther, morphinomane.... Vos veines bleues le long du poignet...sont preque violettes et...c'est exquis" (Rachilde 1925: 14).

Eliante's power over Leon grows in the moonlight,[59] and she sees him in a metaphoric reversal of the gendered system of decadent dialectics; he becomes the natural while she "remained a large, painted doll, very interesting because it is perfectly natural for dolls to be artificial" (*J* 12)[60] when they "assum[e] a tragic mask" (*J* 13)[61] required by society.

This mask foreshadows the performance of inversion which is about to occur where Eliante proves that in sexual performance, "gender is a creation of self-presentation and social attribution, not of god-given or genetically fixed biological 'fact'" (Feldman 37), but rather where "Decadent love and creation, by virtue of their twisted tableaux of dangerous possibilities, act as an antidote to society's sentimental farce of vulgar sexual and pseudoartistic activities" (Feldman 35). Eliante challenges the notion of the essentialism of

[59]Moonlight is traditionally equated with woman's sexual power in concurrence with her menstrual cycles, a tradition which was capitalized on in Oscar Wilde's *Salome* as well as in Aubrey Beardsley's drawings of the play including the famous portrait of Wilde as the man in the moon who gazes upon the decadent drama below as if he is the puppetmaster of their fates.

[60]"demeurait une grande poupée peinte, très intéressante parce qu'il est fort naturel que les poupées soient artificielles" (Rachilde 1925: 16).

[61]"prenait un masque tragique" (Rachilde 1925: 17).

woman's sexual nature through her self-indulgent denial of Leon's desire, choosing instead for her partner

> an alabaster vase the height of a man, so slim, so slender, so deliciously troubling with its ephebe's hips, with such a human appearance, even though it retained the traditional shape of an amphora, that the viewer remained somewhat speechless. The foot, very narrow, like a spear of hyacinth, surged up from a flat and oval base, narrowed as it rose, swelled, at mid-height, to the size of two beautriful young thighs hermetically joined and tapered off towards the neck where, in the hollow of the throat, an alabaster collar shone like a fold of plump flesh, and, higher up, it opened out, spreading into a corolla of white, pure, pale convulvulus, almost aromatic since the white, smooth material with its milky transparence had such

lifelike sincerity. (*J* 18)[62]

Placed in her boudoir amongst "strange knickknacks of Japanese complication or Chinese tortuousness" (*J* 18)[63], the vase is "inhabited by a soul" (*J* 20)[64] that is gendered masculine by Eliante in spite of its feminized description. Eliante allows for Leon's voyeurism, encouraging his incredulity by admitting she wants "to be in ecstasy...over something immortal" (*J* 20)[65] because she is "in love with everything that is beautiful...the very definition of pleasure. But pleasure is not [her]

[62]"un vase d'albâtre de la hauteur d'un homme, si svelte, si élancé, si délicieusement troublant avec ses hanches d'éphèbe, d'une apparence tellement humaine, bien qu'il n'eût que la forme traditionnelle de l'amphore, qu'on en demeurait un peu interdit. Le pied, très étroit, lisse comme une hampe de jacinthe, surgissait d'une base plate et ovale, se fuselait en montant, se renflait, atteignait, à mi-corps, les dimensions de deux belles jeunes cuisses hermétiquesment jointes et s'effilait vers le col, avec là, dans le creux de la gorge, un vourrelet d'albâtre luisant comme un pli de chair grasse, et plus haut, cela s'épanouissait, s'ouvrait en corolle de liseron blanc, pur, pâle, preque aromal, tant la matière blanche, unie, d'une transparence laiteuse, avait la sincérité de la vie" (Rachilde 1925: 22).

[63]"les bibelots étranges de complication japonaise ou de tourment chinois" (Rachilde 1925: 22).

[64]"qu'une âme l'habite" (Rachilde 1925: 23).

[65]"vous extasier...sur quelque chose d'immortel" (Rachilde 1925: 25).

goal; it's a way of being" (*J* 22)[66].

Eliante "rendered divine [her sexuality] again, and thus controlled [herself], reduced to the coolness of marble breasts" (Baudrillard 23) like the Baudelairean dandy, choosing the statue because it

> will not metamorphose into life, because the dandy's imperturbability freezes all movement. Yet a certain kind of change does occur. When volupté does not melt him, when he cannot find a living woman who will complete his own beauty and prove herself worthy of the possessing, he can claim these failings as victories, seek only "l'amour désintéressé" and cultivate his sangfroid. (33)

While it is facile to understand Eliante's complex desire as a reflection of the male dandy, she does declare woman's sexuality as traditionally limited when one "look[s] for a sex organ in the object of [her] love!" and is "humiliated because an intelligent man immediately thinks of...sleeping with [her]" (*J* 22)[67]. The elipses

[66]"réellement amoureuse de tout ce qui est beau...la définition même de la volupté. Mais ce n'est pas le but, le plaisir; c'est une manière d'être" (Rachilde 1925: 26).

[67]"chercher un sexe à l'objet de mon amour! je suis humiliée parce qu'un homme intelligent pense tout de suite à...coucher avec [elle]" (Rachilde 1925: 27).

in Rachilde's text at this crucial moment of Eliante's sexual development are parallel to the gaps in George Egerton's psychological stream-of-consciousness which surrounds her unnamed dancer; as Eliante speaks of her vase, just as the unnamed Salome figure frenetically dances, the climaxes are unspeakable in the language of convention precisely because they only include the male as passive voyeur. Eliante "was not offering herself to the man; she was giving herself to the alabaster vase, the one insentient person on the scene [w]ithout a single indecent gesture, arms chastely crossed on this slender form" (*J* 23)[68] of androgynous, or hermaphroditic, tendency.

Throughout the text, the only manner in which Leon can comprehend what has occurred is to cast Eliante in the role of "Actress! Horrible actress" (*J* 23)[69] and her performances as acts upon which the "curtain falls" (*J* 24)[70] to shut out the "madwoman['s]" (*J* 16)[71] deviant

[68]"Elle ne s'offrait point à l'homme; elle se donnait au vase d'albâtre, le personnage insensible de la pièce. Sans un geste indécent, les bras chastement croisés sur cette forme svelte" (Rachilde 1925: 27).

[69]"Comédienne! Abominable comédienne!" (Rachilde 1925: 28).

[70]"Rideau!" (Rachilde 1925: 28).

[71]"une folle" (Rachilde 1925: 20).

behaviour which he is unable to assimilate.[72] In fact, although his outburst places him on the side of convention, Leon unwittingly sees a glimpse of her truth as "an artist transcending the limits of possibility in art" (*J* 23)[73] by the unification of art and female sexuality which creates her decadent spirit. Eliante incarnates Nietzsche's conflation of art and artist where "the force that one expends in artistic conception is the same as that expended in the sexual act: there is only one kind of force" that, in a male artist, "can be a sign of decadence" (Nietzsche 1968: 815) which he sees as limiting, but Rachilde sees as a mode of transcendence.

Eliante's unrepentant self-possession sends Leon into a series of debauches with prostitutes, widows, and his own versions of marble women (*J* 29) because he is unable to escape her "*exoticism* [which] has perverted [his] senses" (*J* 29)[74]. Leon remains inconsolable until, in his alienation, he returns to Eliante. Leon's return leads to his discovery of another woman in the House of

[72]In both cases, the epithets used by Leon reiterate the stereotypes previously discussed in regard to Alcott, Egerton and D'Arcy's heroines.

[73]"une artiste dépassant la limite du possible en art" (Rachilde 1925: 27).

[74]"*l'exotisme* a perverti [ses] sens" (Rachilde 1925: 31).

Denalger: Missie, a New Woman with "tomboyish mannerisms" (*J* 38)[75] who, according to Eliante, is "ignorant of the art of being a woman" (*J* 42)[76] and whose "brain is heavy, but she must be taught to style her mind" (*J* 59)[77] because she wants to "be a doctor of medicine"[78] (*J* 43)[79]. In spite of Eliante's entreaties to Leon to consider her niece as a potential wife, Leon continues to pursue the aunt until she openly rebukes "the importunity of [his] body standing between [them]" (*J* 56)[80]; she admits that she loves him, but only as an abstraction, because her "alabaster vase seems more harmonious...less savage in its attitude, immobilized in the loveliest human position, the sexless position" (*J* 58)[81]. Eliante anticipates Leon's violent reaction to her insult because

[75]"ces manières de garçon manqué" (Rachilde 1925: 37).

[76]"ignorant l'art d'être femme" (Rachilde 1925: 42).

[77]"cerveau est lourd, mais il faut lui apprendre à coiffer son esprit" (Rachilde 1925: 55).

[78]This theme, of the woman with the intelligence and desire to be a doctor, also appears in *La Marquise de Sade* (1887).

[79]"docteur en médecine" (Rachilde 1925: 54).

[80]"l'importunité de son corps dressé entre [lui]" (Rachilde 1925: 52).

[81]"mon vase d'albâtre me paraît plus harmonieux, moins sauvage d'attitude, immobilisé dans la plus jolie posture humaine, la posture sans sexe" (Rachilde 1925: 54).

she predicts that he "can only translate [her] resistance...into a desire to be raped" (*J* 70)[82]; in fact, on two occasions he claims "he obeyed mechanically *because he was wearing a suit;* if he had been in an ordinary jacket, he would undoubtedly have raped" (*J* 18)[83] or killed her. Leon sees her as perverse because, like Baudrillard's seductive and powerful woman, she "pretend[s] to be seduced without being seduced, without being capable of being seduced" (Baudrillard 22). His rage at her powerful perversion of his hypocritical, conventional morality leads him to a derivative, or secondary, masochism Sigmund Freud called "moral masochism [which is] masochism relieved of the kind of sexual content necessary to 'feminine masochism'--it is masochism desexualized" whereby "moral masochists take their pleasure in being tormented by ideas or in being exquisitly sensitive" (Freud 35).

The pleasure which Eliante finds in the masochistic suffering of Leon is only short-lived; her mission is to

[82]"peux traduire votre résistance...que par un désir de viol" (Rachilde 1925: 64).

[83]"machinalement, il obéit *parce qu'il était en habit;* s'il avait été en veston, il l'aurait sans doute violée" (Rachilde 1925: 21).

see her niece married in a more conventional plot because of what Eliante sees as both Leon and Missie's limited potential. To do so, she realizes she must become the actress, and entice Leon into her web of deception. Like a "vampire" (*J* 90)[84] who will drain him of his remaining manhood to secure her niece's future, Eliante reserves the right to find pleasure in the experience. In a rare moment, Eliante allows Leon into her bedroom which looks like a temple full of exotic "animal skins [with]... horrible artificial fangs" which hang over

> a red Smyrna carpet, red currant, winey red with violet, almost black, patterns, spread out a pool of blood or grapes on which one trod with a certain apprehension about possible splashes (*J* 74)[85],

either from the rug or oneself as sacrifice to the "strange idols, from the traditional Buddha...to the Snake God of Oceania...Under a dais of Indian muslin, a

[84]"un vampire au ventre argenté glissant, ondulant" (Rachilde 1925: 84).

[85]de longues peaux de bête pendaient [avec]...les horribles crocs artificiels...un tapis de Smyrne rouge, d'un rouge groseille, vineaux, aux dessins violâtres, presque noirs, étalait une mare de sang ou de vendage qu'on foulait avec une certaine appréhension des rejaillissements possible" (Rachilde 1925: 67-68).

Brousse silk, iridescent, changing" (*J* 74)[86] according to Eliante's primeval sexuality. The crowning glories to her boudoir are "a black Eros, an antique marble statue...[with a] face of regular ferocity, [and the] eyes of a real, divine existence" (*J* 75)[87] contrasted with wax statuettes[88] varied [in] pose...all white, all pale with pleasure, impassive little madwomen, frozen in their works of love at the precise moment when they could have enjoyed what was happening to them" (*J* 85)[89]. Leon finds them "pure of form" (*J* 86)[90] until he recognizes that they represent Eliante, having been copied from her own body by her now dead husband.

[86]"des idoles bizarres, depuis le traditionnel bouddha...jusqu'au *dieu-serpent* des Océaniens...sous un dais de mousseline indienne, une soie de Brousse aux nuances irisées, chageantes" (Rachilde 1925: 68).

[87]"un *Eros* noir, une antique statue de marbre.... [avec une face] régulièrement féroce, [et les] yeux d'une réelle existence divine" (Rachilde 1925: 68).

[88]An interesting note: Eliante claims that these miniature copies are to be later represented by Chinese sculptures "in ivory or any other substance which can be painted in skin tones" ((*J* 86) "sur ivoire ou sur toute autre substance qui peut se peindre selon les tons de la chair" (Rachilde 1925: 80)), a fact which begs an explicit comparison to the marble women of Alcott's fiction.

[89]"varièrent la posture...toutes blanches, toutes pâles de voluptés, petites folles impassibles, figées dans leurs travaux d'amour au moment précis où elles auraient pu s'amuser elles-mêmes de ce qui leur arrivait" (Rachilde 1925 79).

[90]"pures de forme" (Rachilde 1925: 80).

Eliante admits that she "didn't always want to go along with his fantasies, because [she] was far too young to grasp the divine sense" (*J* 86)[91] of sexuality as she does now; however, the more important revelation is in Leon's disgust. While he is able to appreciate the statues for their beauty, Leon is revolted by Eliante's understanding of the "Eroticism" (*J* 87)[92] of her own artistic form, seeing them instead as "emblems of conjugal prostitution" (*J* 87) which are "rudely depraved" (*J* 96)[93] because in his social framework, prostitutes and fallen women are the only women who both desire and participate in active sex. Leon attempts, in the manner of Freud and Breuer's early psychoanalytic *Case Studies on Hysteria*, to explicate Eliante's deviance:

> Medically, persons of your sex who allow themselves the luxury of a *supernatural* physicality--and it's clear that you live as you come--end up with illnesses of which the least horrible is *St. Vitus's dance*...if they aren't already suffering complete

[91]"ne voulais pas toujours me prêter à ses fantaisies, parce qu'[elle était] bien trop jeune pour en saisir le sens divin" (Rachilde 1925: 81).
[92]"L'érotisme" (Rachilde 1925: 81).
[93]"les emblèmes de la prostitution conjugale" (Rachilde 1925: 81).

paralysis. (*J* 95)[94]

In the manner of Freud's labelling of Dora or Anna O, Leon declares "Eliante is a pathological case, she's a nervous woman, superstitious, a little mad" (*J* 117)[95], a label that grants Leon a false sense of security although it completely misunderstands the woman.

Rachilde's elucidation of the female decadent, is much like Eliante's need to make herself understood as a "juggler" (*J* 103)[96] of art, colour, style, artifice, stereotypes and sexual desires. In the spirit of a debutante ball, Eliante throws a "feast of innocence... [with] exquisite art extending to the slightest details" (*J* 104)[97], including a theatre featuring a comic singer, and an orchestra. The *pièce de resistance* is the anticipated act of *la jongleuse*, none other than Eliante. For her act, Eliante wears

a very high-necked leotard of black silk, ending at

[94]"Médicalement, les personnes de ton sexe qui se permettent le luxe d'un physique *surnaturel*,--et il est clair que tu vis comme on jouirait,--finissent par des maladies dont la moins horrible est la *danse de Saint-Guy*" (Rachilde 1925: 87).

[95]"Eliante est un cas pathologique, c'est une femme nerveuse, superstitieuse, un peu folle" (Rachilde 1925: 106).

[96]"jongleuse" (Rachlde 1925: 93).

[97]"fêtes de l'innocence!...[avec] l'art exquis s'épandant sur les moindres détails" (Rachilde 1925: 94).

> the neck in the corolla of a dark flower. Only her arms were bare. A belt of black velvet embroidered with diamond stars encircled her thighs, and she was wearing a little white wig, powdered, a clown's wig, ending in a crest under a diamond butterfly. For her modesty, she had put on a velvet mask, and of her skin one could really only see her mouth, very red, her mouth between parentheses...on a black and white page. (J 106)[98]

Entirely aware of her effect on the aristocratic, male voyeurs who people her audience, she commands their attention with her "*form* undisguised despite the disguise...of an almost masculine appearance" (J 106-107) with the "eyes of a tigress" (J 107)[99].

[98]"Eliante Donalger portait le maillot collant de l'acrobate, un maillot de soie noire très montant, se terminant au cou en corolle de fleur sombre. Elle n'avait que les bras nus. Une ceinture de velours noir brodée d'étoiles de brillants lui sanglait les cuisses, et elle se coiffait d'une petite perruque blanche, poudrée, un perruque de clown, se terminant enhoupe sous un papillon de diamants. Pour sa pudeur, elle avait mis un masque de velours, et on n'apercevait réellement de sa chair que sa bouche, très rouge, sa bouche entre parenthèses...sur une page blanche et noire!" (Rachilde 1925: 95-96).

[99]"*forme* non déguisée malgré le déguisement...une allure presque masculine...les yeux de tigresse" (Rachilde 1925: 96-97).

The performance, both the juggling of knives and of gender roles, is dramatic for the implications of suicide when she allows the knives to plunge into her throat--although an act, metaphorically limiting her female voice--and in her transvestism or drag which is an extreme form of masquerade which accents the performative nature of gender. According to Sandra Gilbert, in the nineteenth century, clothes were like uniforms denoting one or other sex; further, "because clothing powerfully defines sex roles, both overt and covert fantasies of transvestism are often associated with the intensified clothes consciousness expressed by these writers" (71). Her aggressive performance in transgressive attire was not "in [Leon's] honor or in their honor, she juggled to please herself...as though one could feel another blade both perfidious and passive vibrate in her" (*J* 108)[100] in front of their acute looks of desire and in the atmosphere of an amorous electricity which sets up the possibility of her final performance: the sexual capture of Leon through an act of artistry.

[100]"en son honneur ou en leur honneur, elle jonglait pour s'amuser. On sentait vibrer en elle comme une autre lame à la fois perfide et passive" (Rachilde 1925: 97).

Capable of "intelligent cruelty" (*J* 152)[101], Eliante understands that "what was to count eternally, were the appearances it pleased her to assume" in her quest for pleasured being, and "she knew that in the *costume of that role*" (*J* 148)[102] she could "abandon the present game in order to play the eternal one, by elevating her art to an apotheosis" (*J* 151)[103] which would cause him to "remain [her] slave" (*J* 154)[104]. Eliante plans an evening of female costuming and erotic dancing--uncharacteristic of her previous performances--to which she invites Leon. Leon believes his desire for her will finally result in his seduction; instead, Eliante mesmerises him with her hypnotic dance which "was the living and suffering poem of a body tormented by strange passions" (*J* 196)[105] as she "was smiling, no longer concerned with earth. She was

[101]"cruautés intelligentes" (Rachilde 1925: 135).
[102]"ce qui devait compter éternellement, c'étaient les appearences qu'il lui plaisait de prendre...elle savait que dans *le costume de ce rôle-la*" (Rachilde 1925: 132)
[103]"Abandonner la partie du présent pour jouer celle de l'éternité, en élevant son art jusqu'à l'apothéose" (Rachilde 1925: 134).
[104]"demeurer [son] esclave" (Rachilde 1925: 137).
[105]"c'était le poème vivant et souffrant d'un corps tourmenté de passions bizarres" (Rachilde 1925: 170).

dancing for herself, in a hell she knew well" (*J* 197)[106] because "dance...cannot concern man. Inevitably a man must [only] watch dancing" (*J* 197)[107] and is unable to participate in its erotic gesture. Revisioning the sacrifice of Wilde's Salome, she uses her fingers to "slit her throat, [then] moved them over to her naked breast and traced the path of the blood which spurted in a gush" (*J* 199)[108], horrifying her audience yet exultant over the power of her artistic vision when coupled with love (*J* 200) to create sexualized art. Eliante uses her dance to mesmerize Leon into a sexual tryst in the darkness; she fraudulently agrees to allow him to assume the position of master and dictate that she should "[smash] the wax statues and the collection of ivories so that [no one] should...be scandalized" (*J* 202)[109] by her secret life. After several hours, he awakens to realize

[106]"souriait, ne s'occupant plus de la terre. Elle dansait pour elle, dans un enfer qu'elle connaissait bien" (Rachilde 1925: 174).

[107]"la danse...ne peut pas concerner l'homme. Fatalement un homme doit regarder danser" (Rachilde 1925: 167).

[108]"elle creusa sa gorge, les promena sur son sein nu et traça le chemin du sang qui jaillit à flot" (Rachilde 1925: 175).

[109]"brisé les statues de cire et la collection des ivoires pour que...n'en soient point scandalisés" (Rachilde 1925: 178).

that he is both betrayer and betrayed, in bed with Missie, while Eliante again juggles her "five swords of pain" (*J* 204)[110] in a tableau he is forced to watch her as she "stretched out her throat. The knife, heavier, coming from higher, planted itself straight in, and her powerful little fingers drive it in, pushed with all their might, clenched on the ebony handle" as a "purple wave drowned the pale mask" (*J* 205)[111] of Eliante's face which signals the orgasm of the decadent woman who retains her power over man even in death.

Rachilde's texts, full of passages of purple prose and stylized writing akin to other breviaries of decadence, include women who prove to be, so far, the epitome of the decadent woman who usurps the position of artist, either of self or other, to expose the many masks of propriety which women wear in respectable society. They are, like Raoule de Venerande, "strange creature[s]" because they "run too far ahead of [their] century" (*MV* 103)[112], and redefine the possibility of female

[110]"les cinq glaives de douleur" (Rachilde 1925: 179).

[111]"tendit la gorge. Le couteau, plus lourd, venant de plus haut, se planta droit, et ses petits doigts puissants l'y enfoncèrent, appuyèrent de toutes leurs forces, crispés sur le manche d'ébène...un flot poupre noya le masque pâle" (Rachilde 1925: 180).

decadents/ce.

[112]"L'étrange créature, lorsqu'elle abandonnait le domaine de la passion et cessait de courir trop en avant de son siècle" (Rachilde 1888: 179).

Conclusion

Defining Female Decadents/ce

In this exploration of female decadents/ce, I have tried to cover a fairly broad spectrum of fictional, theoretical and historical ground to show that the construction or understanding of such a figure is more than complex, but is worthy of continuing interest for its importance to a revision of women's writing in the mid to later nineteenth-century.

In representations in art and life, Simone de Beauvoir points out how historically

> Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and as his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. He exploits her, but she crushes him, he is born of her and dies in her; she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will; Nature is a vein of gross material in which the soul is imprisoned, and she is the supreme reality; she is contingence and Idea, the finite and the whole; she is what opposes the Spirit, and the Spirit itself. Now ally, now enemy, she appears as the *dark chaos* from whence life wells

> up, as this life itself, and as the over-yonder toward which life tends. Woman sums up nature as Mother, Wife and Idea... (my italics, 144)

Nietzsche, as the foremost philosopher of decadence, has theorized man's fear of this dark, chaotic realm of woman and designates her as man's Dionysian Other. In defining the will to power as art, Nietzsche makes one such radical distinction between woman's aesthetics and a masculine aesthetics when he asserts that "Our aesthetics have hitherto been a woman's aesthetics" which he believes is unfortunate because "women have no conscience for art" (1968: 838).

Nietzsche's philosophy poses interesting questions for the concept of the decadent as his aggressive concept of aestheticism demands that it is a physiological phenomenon and that artistic creativity is an urge to sterile procreation which stems from "an indirect demand for the ecstasies of sexuality communicated to the brain" (Nietzsche 1968: 805). In fact, Nietzsche questions whether "any link at all would be missing in the chain of art...if the works of women were missing" (1968: 817). Since my discussions have considered four women artists whom I believe to be crucial to a comprehensive

examination of the decadent movement, I have tried to keep in mind that any feminist reading of these texts must be moderated by the belief that

> Every binary split creates a temptation to merely reverse its terms to elevate what has been devalued and denigrate what has been overvalued. To avoid the tendency toward reversal is not easy--especially given the existing division in which the female is culturally defined as that which is not male. In order to challenge the sexual split which permeates our psychic, cultural and social life, it is necessary to criticize not only the idealization of the masculine side, but also the reactive valorization of femininity. What is necessary is not to take sides but to remain focused on the dualistic structure itself. (Benjamin 9))

The dualistic structure of which Nietzsche's decadence speaks is of the gods Apollo and Dionysus around whom he organizes two binary drives of existence, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, both of which are "formative forces arising directly from nature" which are later depicted by the "human artist" (Nietzsche 1967: 24). To this end, I see decadent literary art, both male and female, as a

mirror of the human psyche which becomes a record of this basic struggle and the gendered responses to it in the search for subjectivity.

In his essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault points out that it is the task of the genealogical historian to scramble received notions of a "true" self at the base, of a "nature" or "soul" which "pretends unification or ...fabricates a coherent identity" (Foucault 1984: 81). Through the movements of the experience, this natural self is revealed not to be a unified, coherent whole; instead, there is a Dionysian conundrum, a confused subjectivity; not "a possession that grows and solidifies, [but]...an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within and underneath" (Foucault 1984: 82). The body, as "the locus of this dissociated self" and thus inseparable from it, is revealed to be a "volume in perpetual disintegration" (Foucault 1984: 83). Camille Paglia's view in *Sexual Personae* follows Foucault's thesis that true nature, or the Chthonian, is not benign; rather, it is a "gruelling erosion of natural force, flecking, dilapidating, grinding down, reducing all matter to fluid, the thick

primal soup from which new forces bob, gasping for life" (30). This primal ooze from which human identities and subjectivities spring poses a distinct threat for those individuals who confuse his/her persona or defensively-constructed societal identity with Dionysian human nature.

True nature, or Dionysian reality, is possibly identifiable as the place where rules are formed, transgressed and re-formed. As a result, the eruptions of the Dionysian through art into the Apollonian realm are always revolutionary. The "meticulous procedures that impose rights and obligations...and [give] rise to the universe of rules" (Foucault 1984: 85) are subverted in the Dionysian power play for control, even in art where

> Art is a ritualistic binding of the perpetual motion machine that is nature.... Art is order. But order is not necessarily just, kind or beautiful. Order may be arbitrary, harsh, and cruel. Art has nothing to do with morality.... The artist makes art not to save humankind, but to save himself. (29)

In fact, Nietzsche proclaims that "almost everything we call 'higher culture' is based on...cruelty" (1989: 158)

which results from sexuality. Further according to Nietzsche, this genesis of art through the Dionysian creates an exalted power of pleasure and arouses states in the artist of intoxication (read ecstasy), sharpness of senses (read synaesthesia), and compulsion to imitate (read artificiality). In addition to these artistic states, and in response, the decadent female subject sees

> the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is, as produced or generated, which opens up possibilities of "agency" that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary. (Butler 147)

As a result, for the female decadent writer or the female decadent character,

> the critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions [of male-authored decadence], to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and,

> therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them (Butler 148)

while not necessarily using or discarding all of the practices without some fluidity between them.

The women I have discussed here--Alcott, Egerton, D'Arcy and Rachilde--as well as their fictional decadents/ce, usurp and move beyond those practices of decadent conventions found in stylistic details, exotic descriptions, marble women, portraits of alienation,[1] *femme fatales*, sexual deviances/differences, linguistic codes, social dialectics, artistic Hellenism, class polemics, and abundant artificiality to create a sexual and politicized female decadent. Such female decadents/ce, rather than passively acquiesce to a decadent influence that is dangerous to both the feminist text and the female psyche due to male-authored narrative strategies whose misogyny had believed woman incapable of a transcendant decadence, create sexualized, doubly

[1]I borrow this specific characterization of the self-creation of these decadent women as art from a phrase in Richard Dellamora's article "Representation and Homophobia in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" (1988) where he discusses the portrait of Dorian Gray as "a visible sign of self-alienation" (29) because it accurately describes the self-awareness of the decadent artist, but also locates his/her investment in the process of artistic explication.

decadent art based on the intoxication of cruelty in order to become Dionysian Dominatrices.

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Appendix A:

Smudgiton, Borgia. "SHE-NOTES with Japanese Fan de Siècle Illustrations by Mortarthurio Whiskersly." *Punch, or the London Charivari*. (March 10 and March 17, 1894): 109 & 129.

SHE-NOTES.

By Bobbia Skydoiton.

With Japanese Fan de Siècle Illustrations by Mortarthurio Whiskersly.

"My Soozie! My Toozie! My Soozie!"

It is the voice of a man, and he sings. He has grey eyes, and wears a grey Norfolk-broad. They accentuate one another; the pine-trees also accentuate his fishing-rod. His hum blends with the bleating of the *Bufo vulgaris* and the cooing of *Coleoptera*.

Beside a fallen pine lies a woman (*genus*, in fact, *mulichra*). Where the tree fell there she lies. Her fresh animal instinct sniffs the music-hall refrain; the footlights of the Pavillon Rouge mix rather weirdly with a vision, just rudely interrupted, of terra-cottas from Tanagra. Not every woman thinks of these things in a wood.

The male is a student of the Eternal Femininity. Already, while still out of gunshot, he has noticed her wedding-ring and the diamond keeper. "Talking of keepers," he begins, with the affected drawl now sufficiently familiar to the reader, "are we trespassing here?" She replies in her frank unembarrassed way. "Better ask a p'leeceman," she says. (A lady, obviously! Worth cultivating? Bet your braces!)

"After trout, you know. Any local tips in flies?" A rare smile comes with her ready answer. "'Pick-me-ups' after a heavy night; 'Henry Clays' after lunch; 'spotted cocktails' for the evening. Like a 'coachman' myself; sometimes find them quite killing!" "Happy coachman!"

A chill comes over the sylvan scene with these reckless words. She has gathered her cream-coloured mittens about her wrists; the contrast at once strikes him; in the subdued evening light he can see that her hands are unwashed. She bows coolly, and is off across the stream like a water-snake.

* * * * *

She is lounging nervously on the edge of the parlour-grate. There are two (an acute observer would say three) furrows on her forehead. "Off your pipe, old chappie? Feel a bit sheep?" (It is her husband who speaks in this way.) "Yes, beastly, thanks, old man!" "Try a nip o' whiskey. No soda; soda for boys. There, that's right! Buck up! What's your book?" "Oh! one of Wilde's little things. I like Wilde; he shocks the middle classes. Only the middle classes are so easily shocked!" He smiles a gentle, dull smile. There is a long pause; he cannot follow her swift eternally feminine fancy. "What's it now, old buffer? A brass for your thoughts!" "I was thinking, little woman, of a filly foal I once had. She grew up to be a mare. I never would have let anyone on God's beautiful earth ride her." "I'd have ridden her!" "No, you wouldn't!" "Yes, I would!" (passionately and concentratedly). "Well, I sold her anyway. Lucky the beast isn't here now to spoil our conjugal unity!" The crisis had past. Another moment and she might have left him for ever lonely and forlorn! But in a twinkling her wild, free instinct doubles at a tangent. With a supple bound she is on his shoulders curling her lithe fishing boots into one of his waistcoat pockets. Surely gipsy blood runs in her veins!

"Oh! I wish I were a devil" (it is the lady speaking); "yes, a d-e-v-i-l!" "But you *are*, old woman, you *are*!" and such a dear little devil!" "Say it again, old man!" (kissing him fiercely in the left eye and worrying his ear like a ferret), "I love to hear you call me that. We women yearn for praise!" "You're a rare brick, old dear; and you're never jealous. Look at that photo of the other girl! Some women would have cut up rough about it. But you—why, you sent her a quid when she was peckish, and she chewed it for a week! Was there ever such a little chip?"

* * * * *

(*To be continued.*)

SHE-NOTES.

BY BORGIA SMUDGITON.

With Japanese Fan de Siècle Illustrations by Mortarthurio Whiskerly.

PART II.

SHE is lying on her back in a bog-stream. Strangely enough there are white clouds waltzing along the sky. To her fancy, which is nothing if not picturesque, they are a troop of fairy geese on their way to Michaelmas. No? well then, plainly they are ANTONY and CLEOPATRA. And oh! the dalliance, the wild free life of Egypt! No dinners to order; very little washing on Mondays.

Presto! In imagination she is on a stage. She is a *Tableau Vivant!* All the fauteuils have their glasses up. She has pink overalls, with a cestus round her neck. Her lissom limbs scintillate; she dances slightly. KILANYI says she must try and keep still. A moment more and there is a lovely cat-call from the gallery; she can still hear it above the orchestra, as the next tableau is being wheeled on. It was a supreme keynote!

And the other women? Crushed, joyless, machines — misunderstood! How can the dense brute male read the enigma of the Female Idea? They think us innocent! not we! but we all keep up the deception and lie courageously. They will never know that we are really primitive, untamable, incredulous emancipatrices.

"Get the blue devils, little witch?" (It is the grey man. He has dropped his drawl and his fly-book. They have been getting on nicely, thank you, since we saw them last.)

"Yes, we are all witches, we women. We can read men, but they can't read us." "Can't *I* read you?" "*Me*, the real ineffable me? Yes, perhaps just a little. You have a dash of the Everlasting Female in you." As she speaks she rolls up her shawl into an infinitesimal pellet.

"Well, look here" (desperately). "What do you say to a trip in my yacht? Southern seas! Venice! Constantinople! Olympia! And then, when the winds are hushed and the steam is shut off for the night, we would fly with no visible means of locomotion over the silvery deep! You smile? Where is the pain?" "Oh! if I could only have the yacht without you in it!" (He winces.) "Yes, I say, give us women freedom and we would all go one better than NAPOLEON. NELSON knew nothing of the eternal *I*! Bah! and he was blind in the other." "You strange creature!" "No, not strange; only true. Were I more elusive I might be more fascinating."

A long silence broken only by the chirp of a grasshopper. The air is charged like a battery. It seems that a submarine cable connects these two souls. Nevertheless, she distinctly observes that the grasshopper has strained his Achilles-tendon. Curious that at such a climax the minutest detail should not escape her. Am I right in thinking that no novelist has as yet detected this remarkable phenomenon? He comes nearer (I mean the grey man). His skin beneath his collar blushes a rich cobalt. "Is my little moment up?" he gasps. (His stop-watch is in his trembling hand.) "Lord! what a cheek you have!" "Don't, oh, don't say that!" "Very well, I withdraw it." "But listen!" (she is dropping asleep); "listen, I say!" (she will be snoring directly); "if my moment is really ended—and my stop-watch points to the fact—and if you mean to send me away, *hang something white on the gooseberry-bush* (our *gooseberry-bush*) *to-morrow about the ninth hour!*" She rises and is gone like a water-snake.

* * * * *

It is to-morrow about the eighth hour. She is still in bed. There is a nod at the window. It is all right; only a blushing sweet-william. On the mantel-piece is a daguerreotype of her late aunt, in a velvet bodice and other things. But it is not *that* which drives her crazy. It is her husband's cheery pick-axe in the garden. Is he really digging her grave? Why, surely, no; he is simply arranging the onion-bed. Yet what an interesting corpse she would make! The pity is that one can never see one's own corpse in the glass. Stay, is that BETSY? "Oh! BETSY" (the young cook enters demurely for orders), "I wonder had you ever a lover?" "Well, Ma'm, what do you think?" "Say, what happened him, anyway?" "Why, he left me, Ma'm, left me for Another; and" (regretfully) "we might have married, and had such Accomly twins; and, oh! he *had* such a beautiful crest on his writing-paper!"

A moment's tension follows; the next sees the lady feeling for a coin in her dress-pocket. She spins it deftly. "Heads, he stays! tails, he goes! Tails! by all that is virtuous."

"BETSY!" (Her voice is firm, like a quickset hedge.) "BETSY! I cannot spare my 'nighty' just now, but your white apron will do as well. You *do* love me, don't you?" (Kisses her.) "Then for my sake go and hang yourself for a little while on the gooseberry-bush. Mind! the *gooseberry-bush*!" "Yes, Ma'm."

A rare fidelity! And so few men could have understood or even spelt the why in BETSY!

* * * * *

Two hours later she wakes up, and remembers the faithful girl! Perhaps it is even now too late! She hurries through her toilet. The daguerreotype shows no sign. Threads of bogwool float persistently in the summer air. She is by the gooseberry-bush with a stout pair of scissors. Too late! The girl is gone! Another hand, a hand that held a stop-watch, has cut her down, and BETSY is by this time a free and unfettered woman, on her way to a yacht.

The grey man, after all, had his consolation.

Appendix B:

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